



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

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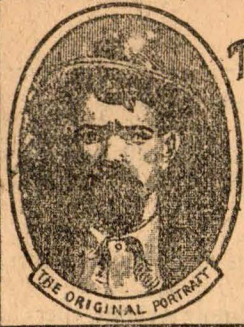
JESSE JAMES' DARE-DEVIL DANCE

OR
BETRAYED BY ONE OF HIS GANG



BY
W. B. LAWSON

HIS FINGERS RELAXED THEIR GRIP, AND WITH A GROAN, JESSE JAMES ROLLED OVER AND PITCHED BACKWARD.



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JESSE JAMES' DARE DEVIL DANCE;

OR,

Betrayed by One of Them.

By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I.

TWO OF AN UGLY KIND.

"I'm ther Steel-Clawed Buzzard from Bitter Creek, gentlemen, so c'lar the way an' gimme room ter flap my wings."

The speaker, a tall, raw-boned individual, with long, coal-black hair, and a ferocious countenance, strode into Mike Hefferin's saloon in Cayuseville, on the western border of Kansas, with spurs jingling, and waving an ugly bowie knife above his head.

It was the occasion of the "grand opening" of the place, in honor of which the local band had been pressed into service and invitations sent to all the leading men of the town.

At midnight the saloon, a long, low room, with the wall ornamented the entire space with gaudily executed paintings, illustrative of picturesque and thrilling scenes on the border, was thronged with people of all sorts and conditions, from mine host of the Golden Stewpan to Slippery Tim, the broken-down sport; from Jim Calkin, the handsome and athletic superintendent of Senator Harding's cattle ranch, to Broken-Nosed Adams, the pardoned burglar, and his pal, Three-Fingered Johnson.

"Gentlemen of Cayuseville," continued the raw-boned stranger, as he leaned against the bar and surveyed the flushed faces about him, "if thar's one thing I'm parshul to more'n another it's music. What does the poick say? He says this, feller citizens:

"'Music's got chawms ter smooth ther savage beast.'

"Certainly it has, and ye'll oblege me one an' all by perceedin' forthwith ter bust inter song."

As he spoke, a stoutly-built man, above the medium height, entered the saloon.

He was dressed like a ranchman, and carried a black-snake whip in his hand.

"Huur's ther galoot what'll do ther warblin' fer me," exclaimed the raw-boned desperado. "Come, open yer bazoo an' let 'er flicker."

The man with the whip lifted a pair of cold blue eyes to the other's face and quietly replied:

"Are you addressing me?"

"Bet yer gizzard I am. Don't yer know me? I'm ther Steel-Clawed Buzzard, I am; ther rampin' catamount from ther Siwash."

The stoutly-built man put one hand behind his ear and inclined his head slightly forward, as if he were deaf.

"Pardon me," he said, in a meek tone, "but I understood you to say that you needed a wash. If you will step out into the back yard, I am sure some of the gentlemen present will be pleased to turn the hose on you."

The big desperado fairly frothed at the mouth at this speech.

Advancing toward the man who had uttered these insulting words, he made a movement as if he were about to plunge the bowie knife into the other's heart.

Quick as a flash he of the cold blue eyes sprang to one

side, and then, lowering his head, sent it forward like a battering-ram.

The big desperado was struck in the pit of the stomach, and with a howl that was sufficient, as Broken-Nosed Adams afterward remarked, "ter wake ther dead in his own private boneyard;" he doubled on the floor, and thereafter was as meek as a lamb.

The man who had vanquished the terror stepped up to the counter, and in a pleasant voice said:

"Gentlemen, this is my treat. Waltz up, all of you, and nominate your poison."

A rush was instantly made for the bar.

One drink followed another, and the hero of the encounter with the Steel-Clawed Buzzard was patted on the back and congratulated in maudlin tones by every man present, except the owner of the bowie.

The latter remained on the floor in a sitting position until the drinks had passed a number of times.

Then, having taken counsel with himself, and being very thirsty withal, he got up, approached the man who had downed him, and quietly asked:

"Ain't I in this, stranger?"

"Certainly, certainly," was the affable response. "Get right in and fill yourself up with booze. It shan't cost you a cent."

"Thanks."

He called for whisky, poured out four fingers, and swallowed the dose at a gulp.

"Goes to the right spot, eh?" said the man who had treated, as he winked at the crowd.

"Stranger, you're not only a dandy, you're a gentleman 'n a scholard 'n a master o' nipe languages. What mout be yer handle?"

"Dave Land," replied the ranchman.

The man who had floored the Steel-Clawed Buzzard surprised his companions by succumbing to his potations, while they were still on their feet and as lively as crickets.

The Buzzard from Bitter Creek was at the counter guzzling rum and sugar, when his late antagonist gave a lurch and fell to the floor.

Three-Fingered Johnson and Broken-Nosed Adams tried to rouse him, but in vain.

"Dead drunk," was the former's comment, given in a tone of deep disgust. "Why, he can't carry of the jag of a sixteen-year-old."

"Put the gentleman in a chair by the corner," said Mike Hefferin, "an' let him shnooze in comfort. He'll be all roight in the marnin', afther he has a couple of eye-openers."

This order was executed.

Not long after this, and while the man who had called himself Dave Land was snoring lustily, the Buzzard, Broken-Nosed Adams, and Three-Fingered Johnson seated themselves at a round table a few feet away.

Hefferin, at the bar, was out of hearing.

The trio began to converse in low tones, like old acquaintances.

"Well, Abe Crane," said Johnson, "what's on the bills? You didn't call us over here to work your mouth for fun, I hope?"

Abe Crane, as we shall hereafter call the tall, raw-boned would-be desperado, smiled affably, as he replied:

"I've got the boss racket of ther year. It's er warake in forty thousand shiners without a atom o' See?"

"No, I don't see," growled Broken-Nosed Adams, was of medium size, but thickset, and had a but countenance, "because you haven't raised the curtain Ting-a-ling-a-ling—now h'ist her."

Abe Crane moved his long arms as if he were turning a crank.

Then he said: "You fellers know erbout ther robbery over in Preston, don't yer?"

"Of course," spoke both of his companions.

"And that one of ther gang was captured?"

"No, hadn't heard of that," said Three-Fingered son."

"Ther sheriff got him yesterday. He was an Ea crook, whom Jesse James had taken in on account o' likeness ter Bob Younger."

"A good recommend, Abe."

"No, a bad one, for ther bloke squealed. But onl thing he said amounted ter shucks, an' that was e ther boodle."

The drunken man in the corner began to snore l than ever.

Abe Crane turned to look at him, when he thre head back suddenly.

It struck the wall with a resounding thud.

The next moment he slipped from his chair to the where he lay in an ungraceful heap, and began to again, but heavier and deeper.

"I've a good notion," said Crane, as he gazed form of the drunkard, "to kick ther stuffin' oute cuss arter we git through our chinnin'."

"No, let him alone," said Three-Fingered Jo sternly. "He's set 'em up in great shape, an' he's a oughbred, if he has got a jag on."

Crane heaved a sigh, and then resumed his story.

"This galoot who was run in," he said, "tol sheriff that ther pursuit of ther gang was so he Jesse James had to bury ther boodle."

"He named the spot, of course," remarked B Nosed Adams, in disappointment.

"No, he didn't, because he didn't know where I know, though."

Abe Crane straightened himself up and smiled be on his companions.

Before either could speak, he went on:

"I got ther secret from Colorado Harris. He was ing off a drunk in the bushes when Jesse James a Cummings rode up to within a few yards of w was, an' began ter lift ther sacks of coin from th dles."

"Harris lay puffickly still, not darin' ter b scarcely, till ther boodle war buried. When Jesse rid off, he moseyed ter town as fast as his legs coul him."

"Why didn't he dig some of ther stuff up?" Three-Fingered Johnson.

"He war afeared that ther gang had left a wa hind, an' bein' a cripple, he concluded he warn fer a scrap. I met him when he was comin' inter ville, an' he opened up ter oncet."

Adams' and Johnson's eyes twinkled avaricious

"We'll have that plant," said the latter, with fierce decision.

"You bet," rejoined Crane, "an' thar's ernuff fer us all, else I wouldn't a-given ther snap away."

"We must dip it up to-night," said Broken-Nosed Adams. "And the sooner we start for the spot the better."

The words had not left his lips before the door of the saloon opened and a shabbily attired old man, with bowed head and trembling limbs, entered softly.

Over his arm was slung a basket, the top being covered with a white cloth.

"Fresh sassengers 'n green co'n, hot ros-en' yers, gentlemen," he cried, in a squeaky treble.

The old man came forward with alacrity, though he limped painfully in the operation.

After he had become richer by sixty cents, he called for whisky, and having drank, sat down in a chair.

In a few minutes he was, to all appearances, fast asleep.

The conversation between the three ruffians then proceeded.

At a few minutes of two o'clock they arose and went to the bar for a parting drink.

Having satisfied their thirst, they moved toward the door, but before they got half way there, the old sausage vender sprang in front of them with the springiness and alacrity of a boy of eighteen.

"Halt!" he commanded, in a stern, insistent tone, "or I'll make a monkey out of every one of you."

Three-Fingered Johnson reached for his pistol, and Broken-Nosed Adams was about to follow suit, when a clear, cold voice from the rear made them pause, and caused ice chills to run down the back of the whilom Buzzard from Bitter Creek.

"Up with your hands," the voice said, "or I'll pump you full of lead."

The man who had been regarded as in the last stages of intoxication had arisen, to take a hand.

Three-Fingered Johnson gritted his teeth in impotent rage.

After the three ruffians had been disarmed they were marched out of the saloon and around the corner to a vacant building.

After the trio and their captors had entered the kitchen, and the door had been closed and locked, the man who had floored Abe Crane said, quietly:

"I suppose you three roosters are wondering what all this means. I will tell you. About midnight I caught Colorado Harris prowling about a certain spot in the woods. He promised to tell me an important secret if I would spare his life. I consented, and then he informed me that you knew where a certain treasure had been hidden."

Abe Crane groaned.

Broken-Nosed Adams and Three-Fingered Johnson swore.

There was a short pause, and then Adams said:

"You and your pard are on the turf yourselves, I reckon."

"Perhaps," said the man who had sold the corn and sausages.

"Then what's the matter with going in and digging up the boodle and having a square whack all around?"

"The matter's this," said Abe Crane's late adversary.

"We have a prior claim on the money."

"The devil you say," ejaculated Three-Fingered Johnson. "And who are you, anyhow?"

The answer fairly took the little ruffian's breath away.

"My name is Jesse James."

"And mine," said the other man, "is Frank James."

CHAPTER II.

THE DETECTIVE'S NARROW ESCAPE.

Mike Hefferin was busily engaged in sweeping the floor of his saloon ten minutes later, when a young man, with a frank, intelligent countenance, entered quickly and asked:

"All gone, Mike?"

"Yis, sor."

"Was an old man around this evening—an old sausage man?"

"Troth an' he war, bad cess to him."

"And a man who looked like a ranchman, and had a blacksnake whip?"

"The same spalpane was here, sor."

"When did these two men leave?" inquired the young man, eagerly.

"Wull, Misther Hastings," said Mike, slowly, "it cudn't have been more nor tin minits ago that Oi sane the backs o' thim goin' out o' that dure."

Karl Hastings' eyes brightened.

"I may overhaul them yet," he said to himself. Then he put this question to the saloon keeper:

"Which way did they go?"

"To the devil, I expect."

"You did not follow them out, then?"

"No, sor."

"That's all you know, then?"

"That's all, sor."

Karl Hastings left the saloon, and looked up and down the street, in indecision.

Jesse James had left Colorado Harris bound to a tree, after he had obtained the information from the cripple of Abe Crane's knowledge of the hiding place of the stolen bank money.

Karl Hastings, who was a detective of high reputation in the West, had come upon the cripple, while returning from an unsuccessful hunt after the robbers.

Harris, out of gratitude for his release, told the detective where Jesse James had gone, and where the money was hidden.

Hastings' first move was to dig up the plunder and put it in a new hiding place.

Then he hurried to Cayuseville for the purpose of seeing the sheriff and engaging his assistance in making the arrest of the leader of the robbers.

Greatly to his disappointment, he found the sheriff gone, as well as all his deputies.

He had parted with the county's officer, with the understanding that the latter was to go to Cayuseville, put up at the leading hotel for the night, and resume his search for the robbers early the next morning.

Hastings' conversation with Mike Hefferin at the saloon has been detailed.

Believing, after mature reflection, that the bandits had gone to the spot where they had buried the bank plunder, he hastened thither.

There was no one about the place, and the hole from which the treasure had been taken was in the same condition in which he had left it.

"They would have pawed the earth over," he said to himself, "and have made foot-tracks in it, if they had been here since I removed the plunder; and not having returned, goes to prove that they are still in town."

Mike Hefferin's was the only saloon found to be open, and into Mike's the detective went on his return to Cayuseville.

It was now close upon daylight.

"Nayther av thim fire-atin' snoozers has been in since ye were here, Misther Hastings," said the saloon keeper, "but O'im thinkin' if ye find Three-Fingered Johnson, an' a long-legged scharecrow who calls himself the wan-eyed boozard from Bitther Crake, ye'll coom acrost the payre of play-actin' toughs yer lookin' fer."

And then, for the first time, Mike told Hastings of the little drama that had been enacted in his place after all but five of the crowd of carousers had gone home.

The detective heard the story and was about to make some reply, when Three-Fingered Johnson rushed in.

"Gimme a drink, Mike, quick," he said, excitedly.

The Irishman put out a bottle and glass, and the little rascal swallowed his liquor so hastily that he had a choking fit.

When he could speak again coherently, he burst forth: "Where can I find the sheriff?"

"In the woods, somewhere," said Hastings.

"Out looking for the James boys, I reckon. Well, he won't find 'em, for they're in town."

"Do you know where they are?" asked the detective, with eagerness.

"I don't know where they are now, but I know where they'll be inside of half an hour."

"And where is that? You may talk to me frankly," added Hastings, as Johnson hesitated, "for I am the sheriff's representative."

"That so, Mike?" inquired Broken-Nosed Adams' pal, turning to the saloon keeper.

"That's the troot, Johnson."

"Then they'll be at the vacant house around the corner. They tied me and Abe Crane and Adams, after they'd put up a job to get us there, and when they went away they said they'd be back in an hour and release us. Before half that time had passed, I got loose and came here."

"Where are your pards?" queried the detective.

"At the house still tied up. I thought it would be best to leave 'em that way, for fear they'd make themselves too conspicuous if I untied 'em and turned 'em out. I made a sneak by the back way to get here, and as I'm little I don't think any one saw me. If Crane had been in my place he would have loomed up like a liberty pole, and have been seen a mile away."

Five minutes later, Hastings and Johnson were on their way to the vacant house.

The latter took the route by which he had come, while the detective, who had changed his personal appearance, chose the street.

It was not his design to enter the vacant house until he had seen his quarry pass through the door.

Three-Fingered Johnson carried three revolvers, one furnished by Hastings, and the other two by Hefferin, and his instructions were to cut the cords which bound his friends when he got back to the kitchen, and insist that they lie in wait for the James boys.

The detective's route took him past a gun shop.

He was opposite the door when his attention was attracted by a queer rasping and boring sound in an upper room.

Hastings at once became suspicious that it was the work of a burglar.

There were a number of rooms for lodgers over the shop, and, mounting the stairs, the detective soon found himself opposite a door which was partly open.

Cautiously peering in, he saw a man with a brace and bit boring holes in the floor, while another man stood by with a candle in his hand.

Karl Hastings recognized the men and also took in the situation at once.

They were Frank and Jesse James, and below them was the gun shop which they were trying to enter in order to obtain a fresh supply of arms.

Retreating as noiselessly as he had come, Hastings went downstairs and began to look about for some person or persons whom he could call upon for assistance.

Mike Hefferin was the only man in sight, and he was standing in the door of his saloon rubbing his eyes.

The detective hastened to his side and rapidly told him what he had discovered.

Day was dawning, and in an hour the majority of the tradesmen would be at their places of business.

"I'll go wid ye, sor," said Mike, "though the job is no peckneek, O'im thinkin'."

When they got to the head of the stairs they listened intently.

No sound of any kind could be heard about the building.

Creeping forward in his stocking feet, the detective for the second time looked into the room where he had left the James boys.

It was empty.

Entering, after beckoning to Mike, he found the holes which had been bored.

"They've been scared away," was his conclusion, "but they haven't left the building, for I kept my eyes on it all the while I was absent."

A systematic search of all the rooms was then begun.

No one was found.

At the last moment they heard the crash of glass in the attic.

"Why didn't I think of the roof?" said the detective, in strong excitement. "They're up there, of course."

To the attic Hastings and his companion hurried.

There they found a long ladder which reached to the skylight on the roof.

The attic itself was not investigated, for the detective felt convinced that the noise of crashing glass came from the roof.

Up the ladder he went, and was soon standing by the skylight.

The glass had not been broken, and he was looking

about him in puzzled wonder, when a cry from Mike in the attic made him start quickly.

"They'll murder me, sure, if yez don't coom quick."

At the side of the skylight was a deep air-well or shaft. Hastings had noticed it, but in his hurry to respond to the Irishman's imploring call, he caught his foot on the end of a shingle that had warped in the sun, and was immediately precipitated into the well.

He fell twenty feet before he met with an obstruction.

This was a wire netting over inch plate glass at the top of the gun-shop proprietor's office.

He crashed through the netting, though it was held down by heavy staples, snapped the plate glass as though it were paper, and went tumbling to the bottom.

Striking the seat of a lounge, he was bounced into the air and then thrown to the floor, where he was found not long afterward in an unconscious condition, but with no bones broken.

But for the netting, which had broken his fall, and the lounge, which had eased it, he would have been instantly killed.

Meanwhile Mike Hefferin was having an experience of his own.

The detective had no sooner reached the roof when Frank and Jesse James stepped from behind a pile of old window sashes in a dark corner of the attic and advanced on the Irishman with cocked revolvers.

Frank had stuck his foot through a pane of glass in the darkness, and in extricating it, had sent the frame crashing to the floor.

This caused the noise heard by Hastings and Hefferin in the corridor below.

The Irishman did not see the outlaws until they were close upon him.

Then he called out loudly for help.

A bullet would have ended his career then and there but for the detective's mishap.

The James boys heard the loud crash of glass as he fell, and instantly guessed what had occurred.

"Your partner has taken a tumble," said Frank James, with a smile. "Hadn't you better take one yourself, Mike?"

"Bedad, but I believe I had, sor."

Up went his hands.

After securing his revolver, the James boys tied him up and then quickly descended to the next floor.

They saw a few persons when they reached the sidewalk, but, being disguised, were not recognized.

When they reached the spot where the bank plunder had been concealed and found that it had been removed, their rage knew no bounds.

"It's that blasted detective's work," said Jesse James, with a fierce oath, "and I'll do him up one of these days, mark my words."

* * * * *

The James boys were now in the southeastern part of Missouri.

A camp had been selected near a small stream, a branch of the Illinois River.

It was in a little hollow, bordered by trees.

Late one afternoon, while the outlaws were cooking dinner, a young man in the garb of a hunter stole noiselessly along a narrow trail leading to the adjacent hills,

until he reached a point a few yards from the opening into the hollow, which was between two tall sycamores.

The young man was Karl Hastings, the detective.

Ensconcing himself behind a rock, he waited for developments.

His face glowed with satisfaction when he saw seated about a fagot fire the leading members of the James boys' gang, as it was then organized.

There were Frank and Jesse James, Jim Cummings, Dick Little, and Sam Bass.

"This is our last day in the hollow," the detective heard Jesse James say, "for that chump of a Hastings has come over to Missouri, got together a posse, and is even now in these woods somewhere looking for us."

"How'd you find out about his movements?" inquired Dick Little, who had been away for a few days and had only reached the camp an hour before.

"I had a friend posted in Carthage, and he overheard what Hastings said to his followers when he started out to locate our camp."

Jesse James' voice sank lower as he went on with his explanation, so that the words finally became unintelligible to the listener.

Anxious to learn who had betrayed his plans, Karl Hastings left his position behind the rock and crawled nearer to the hollow.

He hoped to reach a low-growing bush on the edge of the open space in which his enemies stood, without being seen or heard.

But in his haste to gain the desired point he stumbled over a dead branch.

The noise produced by the incautious movement caught the quick ears of Jesse James.

In two bounds he cleared the hollow to look down upon the form of the man who had foiled his plans at Cayuseville.

Karl Hastings was in the act of rising to his feet when Jesse James threw himself upon him.

In the struggle which ensued, Frank James, Dick Little, and Jim Cummings lent a hand.

Bound hand and foot, the detective was dragged into the hollow, and the stern-faced outlaws were debating what manner of death should be meted out to him, when a medium-sized man, with a beardless face, high cheekbones, and deep-set eyes, which shone with sparkling brilliancy beneath his shaggy eyebrows, appeared suddenly in their midst.

He was trembling with excitement, and his first words carried consternation into the hearts of his auditors.

"Light out of this, boys, as quick as the old one will let you. Hastings' posse is up the cañon, not a quarter of a mile away, and they know where you are."

Jesse James' dark face became livid with passion.

"We've been given away," he said, "and I can guess who the traitor is. It's that craven-hearted Black Sellers."

Then he issued these orders rapidly, but coolly:

"Scatter, boys, and make the liveliest time you ever did in all your lives. We'll meet at the Rock of Alum by noon."

"The spy, Hastings?" inquired Frank James; "what's to be done with him?"

"Leave him to me," was the fierce response of his brother.

"Don't shoot him," urged the man who had given warning of the approach of the officers, "for your shot will bring the enemy down on us, all the sooner."

"Mind your business, Dan Hurley," responded Jesse James, curtly, "and—git."

He pointed commandingly in the direction Jim Cummings and Dick Little had already taken, and Hurley, with a queer look on his face, which the outlaw chief did not see, sprang out of the hollow in the wake of Frank James, leaving Jesse James and the bound detective alone in the open space.

"One knife-thrust," muttered the outlaw, as he knelt beside the body of his intended victim, and drew a sharp-edged bowie from his belt, "and all will be over."

The knife was raised and Karl Hastings closed his eyes.

Another instant and the point of the weapon would have reached the young man's heart, when a shot rang out, sharp and clear, and Jesse James, with an oath, dropped the knife and started, with a scowl of rage, to his feet.

The bullet whizzed so close to his head that it cut off a lock of his hair.

CHAPTER III.

JESSE JAMES' DESPERATE LEAP.

Instead of taking to cover, Jesse James boldly faced the spot from which he judged the shot had been fired, and quickly bringing his rifle to his shoulder, sent bullet after bullet into the bushes.

A mocking laugh was the response.

With lips set in grim determination, Jesse James leaped across the hollow and disappeared in the bushes.

He felt positive that the unseen marksman was Black Sellers.

The day before he would have staked his life on the fidelity of this personage.

At one time Sellers had been a member of the band of outlaws, but in a raid near Ironton he had been captured, and, upon trial and conviction, had been sentenced to the big stone prison in Jefferson City for a term of five years.

After he had served his sentence he found his health so poor—so he informed Frank James, whom he had met in Clay County while on his way to Mrs. Samuels' place—that he felt he could no longer engage in active field service with his former lawless comrades.

It was then arranged that he should do duty in a different capacity; in short, that he should form one of the many spies and confederates who remained in cities and towns in the regions terrorized by the outlaws, and give information whenever necessary of the plans and movements of the officers.

Black Sellers, so called on account of his coal-black hair and beard and his swarthy skin, had posted himself in Carthage at the request of Jesse James, and the day before this chapter opens had sent him information of the coming of Karl Hastings and the movements of the detective's posse.

"He has betrayed me," thought Jesse James, as he forced his way over rocks and through the brush in pursuit of the man who had shot at him, "on account of the

reward which has recently been quadrupled. Forty thousand dollars, or a handsome slice of it, has made him turn on the men who have treated him white in the past, and who would at any moment have risked their lives to save him from danger."

A few moments after Jesse James had left the hollow, the form of a thin, active man appeared at Karl Hastings' side.

With his knife he speedily cut the cords which bound the detective.

The latter arose quickly to his feet and grasped the hand of his rescuer.

"God bless you, Dan," he said, in a husky voice. "Your shot came when it was needed. A second more and I would have been done for."

Dan Hurley—for it was he—smiled in satisfaction.

"I reckoned I'd spoil Jesse's game," he replied, quietly, "when I left him alone with you."

"Where are the boys?" questioned Hastings, as he stretched himself and looked around the hollow.

"Up in Avilla. I told Jesse James they were up the cañon to send his gang a-scooting."

"I didn't think it advisable to take the boys until I had found out exactly where you were. You remember that you left town without telling us where you were aiming."

"Yes, yes, so I did. That's where I made a mistake. But come, we must be moving. The James boys are your meat, if we don't strike a streak of bad luck. They will rendezvous at the Rock of Alum, sure."

"After being aware that the knowledge of their plans in that respect is possessed by you? Hardly."

The detective's countenance fell.

"Perhaps I can hold the gang to the original agreement," remarked Hurley, after a pause.

"How?" asked Hastings, quickly.

"By catching Jesse James up and informing him that I have finished the job which he was obliged to leave."

"In other words, that you have killed me?"

"Yes."

"Good. That scheme ought to work nicely."

"But it won't."

The reply was made by Jesse James, and upon the words he stepped quickly from behind a rock where he had been concealed, his Winchester at his shoulder, and sent a bullet crashing through Dan Hurley's brain.

As the man who had betrayed Jesse fell to the ground, Karl Hastings' pistol cracked.

But the aim was uncertain, and the outlaw stood erect and unharmed when the smoke cleared away.

Another instant might have ended the detective's career had not the unexpected suddenly happened.

There came a woman's scream as Jesse James, cool and relentless, was about to press the trigger of his rifle.

As he hesitated, and as Karl Hastings' eyes turned from the outlaw to a clump of trees about ten feet from where he stood, a sun-browned girl of seventeen rushed into the clearing, a cocked pistol in her hand.

"You here?" ejaculated the outlaw, in a low tone, indicative of both surprise and anger.

"Yes," she boldly replied, "an' you must gimme yer word that you won't hurt him."

"Who?"—coldly.

"The—the young feller thar."

"What is he to you?"—giving her a sharp, suspicious look.

"Nuthin'. I never seen hide nor hair o' him afore."

The frown left Jesse James' face.

He was still facing Hastings, and the appearance of the girl had not caused him to lower his pistol.

"Go back to your mother," he said, quietly. "This is no place for you."

"I can't go back yet, for mother's kicked the bucket. That's why I came hyur. I thought you mout wanter know."

"Dead! That's mighty rough papers on you, Molly, and—and on me, too."

The last words were uttered in a low voice, full of sorrow.

Karl Hastings, pistol in hand, gazed at the scene before him in undisguised amazement.

Who was this attractive creature, with the large, brilliant eyes, the fine features, and form? And what relation did she bear to the dreaded Missouri outlaw?

He was about to speak, when the girl said to Jesse James:

"Be you goin' ter let him go?"

"No, Molly. He is my enemy, an' he has got to die."

"You shan't kill him. If you go ter do it, I'll kill you."

She raised her pistol and pointed it at the head of the outlaw.

Jesse James scowled.

"Let him blaze away," put in the detective, coolly.

"I'm ready for him."

"Shut yer mouth," said the girl, sharply.

Then advancing toward Jesse James, she made the remark:

"You think I ain't peart ernuff ter stop this yer perfo'mance, eh?"

Jesse James nodded his head.

"Then I'll show yer."

She was now close beside the outlaw.

Dropping her pistol, she seized Jesse James' wrist and turned his weapon aside.

"Curse you for a little fool!" he hissed, and tried to throw her off.

But she clung to him with such fierce desperation that when at last he did succeed in freeing himself he found that the detective had made his escape.

In the fruitless search that he made for his enemy, he had the girl for a companion.

She was the daughter of one of the notorious outlaw's old flames. When they were both in their teens they had a lovers' quarrel, and Molly's mother went to another county and married one Josh Culdán, who died the year after Molly was born.

The girl's home was in the mountains, about three miles from the outlaw's camp in the hollow.

"When did your mother die?" Jesse James asked, after they had seated themselves on a fallen log.

"Last night."

"A natural death?"

"Sure."

"When will the funeral take place?"

"To-morrer."

"I shall be there."

"Twon't never do," she said earnestly. "It'll be takin' yer life in yer han's ter come ter Sandy Creek."

"I am used to such adventures. Have no fears on my account."

The girl shook her head, but made no reply to this speech.

"And now go, Molly, for I must hasten to where Frank and the boys are impatiently awaiting me. We had a rendezvous for to-day, but it will have to be changed," he added, with a half frown, "since I have allowed this detective to go."

"A detective?" she exclaimed, in some amazement. "Was the young feller that?"

"Yes."

"I am powerful sorry that I've put you an' Frank in a hole by my doin's," she replied, with a countenance that was expressive of a variety of emotions, "though I ain't er weepin' that I've stopped er bit of killin'."

"I may have to kill him yet," said Jesse James, "for of course he will hurry on to the Rock of Alum."

A few moments after they had parted, Jesse James met Jim Cummings.

"Have you seen anything of Hastings?" inquired the outlaw chief, eagerly.

"No, but I found this yer wiper up ther trail. I reckon it's his'n."

He held up a silk handkercheif and looked at it disdainfully.

"Soaked with 'Jockey Club,' an' got his 'nishals embroidered in a corner. Waugh! but it makes me sick."

The big desperado spread it carefully on the ground.

Then he stood over it and deluged it with tobacco juice.

"I'll leave it thar fer him ter find; that is," with a murderous scowl, "if he's in a condition to find anything arter we git through with him. I reckon he's gone for his posse, eh?"

"Most likely."

This was the fact.

Half an hour later they were at the Rock of Alum.

It was a gray rock of massive proportions, which stood at the head of a small ravine, and here and there, on the surface, were fine crystalline substances tinged with white and yellow.

These substances closely resembled soda alum, and gave the name to the rock.

Frank James, Dick Little, and Sam Bass were already there, and, after a short, hurried consultation, the outlaws set out in the direction of a rugged range of hills some twenty miles distant.

Here they had a camp where there were horses.

They had left it a few days before on foot, for the better carrying out of a plan to rob a rich planter named Lafitte.

By careful inquiry, and without making their presence known in the locality where he lived, they had learned that on a certain evening he would give a grand reception to the Governor of the State, a well-known United States Senator, and several European notables, who were making a pleasure trip through the West.

At this reception there would be also present many of

the rich and handsome society women and girls from Carthage, Jefferson City, St. Louis, and Springfield.

It was Jesse James' intention to raid Lafitte's mansion while this reception or ball was in progress, and rob the guests of their valuables, as well as pay his respects to the host's treasure chest, which was reputed to contain many thousands of dollars in gold, notes, and securities.

"The women will have diamonds enough to satisfy us, even if we get left on the chest racket," said Jesse James, while he was discussing the matter with his associates.

"Hang their diamonds," growled Jim Cummings. "I want their shiners, and, what's more, I'm goin' ter have 'em, even if I have ter give old skeesicks a knock in ther head ter git 'em."

"I'm with you, Jim," said Dick Little. "The bullion is what I'm after."

Jesse James smiled.

"You won't be disappointed," he said, "if your nerve holds out."

Jim Cummings gave a scornful sniff.

"You talk, Jess," he said, "as if we'd done ther baby act some time er nuther."

"I'll bet on you, every time, Jim," remarked Frank James, warmly.

Jesse James nodded his head.

"How about me?" interrogated Dick Little, about whose brow a cloud was gathering.

"You'll always be Dick Little," was the outlaw chief's enigmatical reply.

Had he, then, a premonition that Little would some day go over to the enemy? Or did he have just the faintest distrust of Little's courage?

Whatever Jesse James' feeling was, his words had the effect of causing the man addressed to suddenly drop his eyes to the ground.

The conversation presently took another channel, and the outlaws were soon chatting away like brothers.

On leaving the Rock of Alum, they took their way along by-roads and lonely trails, until they reached a log cabin a few miles from a branch of the White River.

Here they found an aged negro, who had been in their service.

Old Jake showed the whites of his eyes, and shook his head sorrowfully when he greeted them.

"Doan't go up dar"—indicating the direction in which their mountain camp was located—"fo' yo'll fall in de soup, suah."

"Why, what's the matter?" queried Jesse James, in surprise.

"Dar's a whole raft ob ossifers up dar. I seen 'em go by dis bressed mawnin', Marse Jesse, an' dey done tole ole Jake dat dey reckoned dey'd cotch yo' slicker'n bar's grease."

"They did, eh?" with an ominous frown. "And how many of them were there?"

"'Bout fo' dozen, I 'spects, an' dey all had Winchester, an' dar was blood in dere eyes. 'Shoot de murderin' robber on sight,' says dey. 'Dat's w'at we'll do. We'll fill his hide so full ob holes dat he'll look like a siv.'"

"They will, eh? We'll see about that."

Jesse James' brow was as black as night as he hissed out the words.

Then he said to old Jake:

"Have you got a horse?"

"'Spect I hab, Marse Jesse. You 'members Gray Kitty, down yer?"

"Yes"—with a look of pleasure—"and if she is as lively as she was a year ago, she'll answer my purpose."

"She kin knock de eberlastin' spots offen der bes' nag in dese yer hills."

"Bring her out."

While the negro was gone, Jesse James turned to his comrades.

"I am going to ride up to camp," he said, with quiet determination, "and see if the officers have indeed gone that way. I won't be gone long, and if I find that old Jake's story is true, I'll ride back and we'll then prepare to give our enemies a welcome at the camp they little dream of. You will remain here and hold the fort until I get back. I have but a few miles to go, and won't be gone over two or three hours."

Mounted on Gray Kitty, a tough, spirited mare, Jesse James set out on his scouting expedition.

He had gone about two miles, and had ascended a small hill but a short distance from the high bank of the White River, when, chancing to glance over his shoulder, he saw a sight which set his pulses bounding with excitement and alarm.

But half a mile away, and between him and the cabin he had recently left, was a large body of mounted men.

"The officers," he muttered, "and they must have been near old Jake's place when I set out."

What to do was the question.

On one side of him was a precipitous ledge of rock, extending to the bank.

On the other side was open country, and he was about to leave the trail he had been pursuing, and dash along it, when he saw, to his dismay, that the force of officers had divided, and that a dozen men had started to cut off his retreat from the open side.

Behind him were twenty or thirty more officers, all armed with rifles.

Before him was the river.

He knew the country well, and he knew that the river, at the spot where the trail met it, was at its narrowest point.

And yet that point had a width of twenty feet, and the banks were high and rocky.

Could he make Kitty Gray leap the chasm?

It was a dangerous, a desperate undertaking, but it must be made.

Spurring the mare forward, he approached the high bank of the river at a furious gallop.

But instead of making the leap from bank to bank, the mare sank on her knees on the verge, and trembling like an aspen, uttered a series of piteous neighs.

Jesse James gritted his teeth in rage and despair.

He looked back and saw that his pursuers were but little over a quarter of a mile away.

"It's death unless I make the other bank," he muttered, "and I may be killed in the attempt. Never mind, I'll chance it. I can't die but once, and maybe my time has come."

Grim, dogged resolution sat upon his countenance, as he set about preparing for his terrible feat.

With marvelous rapidity, he cut the *riata*—a hair rope

—which had been wound about the horn of the saddle of the mare, into two lengths, and with these strapped his trusty Winchester to his back.

The pursuers were now about four hundred rods away, and they were riding toward him with shouts and yells of triumph.

A moment or two more and he would be a target for all of their bullets.

A hill concealed them from view, as he started back from the verge of the embankment.

Running toward his pursuers for some thirty feet, he suddenly turned, and then, with his lips tightly closed, and his eyes fiercely gleaming, dashed toward the river like a deer.

He had summoned all his courage for the mighty leap, and he reached the verge and sprang into the air, just as the officers reached the brow of the hill.

With bated breath, they saw the reckless outlaw bound over the yawning gulf.

There was but one chance in ten that he would succeed in his mad attempt.

That one chance seemed to have come to Jesse James, for he cleared the space from bank to bank, and his hands clutched convulsively at the bushes growing on the bluff he had gained.

"Now," he panted, as he looked upward with blood-shot eyes, "I have foiled them."

But, at the moment he uttered the words, his support gave way.

Down, down he slipped for six or seven feet.

But his iron nerve never deserted him.

His sinewy hands grasped other supports, and he was clinging to them with the tenacity of death, when a rifle-shot rang out, and, with a groan, his fingers relaxed their grip, and he rolled over, and pitched downward, his body striking the rushing waters with a loud splash.

CHAPTER IV.

KANSAS JERRY MAKES HIS MARK.

The leader of the band of pursuers was a veteran frontier officer, who had been scout, sheriff, marshal, and detective by turns, and who had entered upon the campaign against the James boys' gang without being aware that Karl Hastings was engaged in the same enterprise.

Kansas Jerry, as the veteran was known, had had much experience in dealing with outlaws and desperadoes, and he knew that for cool courage and reckless daring, few, if any, could compare with the redoubtable Jesse James.

The first to reach the verge of the high rocky river embankment, his bullet it was which struck the dreaded outlaw in the wrist, just at the moment when the latter was in the act of drawing himself up to a position that promised temporary safety, in a wide, jagged crevasse but a few feet from where he hung.

Kansas Jerry saw his victim roll over and fall into the water with an expression of triumph, mingled with compassion.

"It's a pity, a dern pity," he muttered, with a sorrowful shake of his shaggy head, and a rapid blinking of his keen gray eyes, "that sich a brave coot as Jess should be sich an ornery devil as he is. It went dead ergin ther

grain ter plug him when he'd made sich a leap as that thar, but it had ter be did in the intrusts of sassiety."

His men came up while he stood gazing at the surface of the rushing water, waiting for the head of the outlaw to reappear.

But, though he watched for many minutes, and had some of his posse go down the bank and make investigations for a quarter of a mile, Jesse James' body, dead or alive, did not show itself.

"Must er hit er rock an' went down fer good," was Kansas Jerry's comment, "an' onless we drag ther river we won't be apt to find ther corpse fer a matter o' nine days, I reckon."

When Jerry's force left the river it was with the profound conviction that Jesse James had at last paid his debt to nature.

"Now we'll go back to the old darky's cabin," said the veteran scout, "an' see if we kain't find out whar Frank an' ther rest of ther condemned outfit is a-hidin'. They mus' be somewhar roun' these yer diggin's, fer Jess never leaves them onless fer a scout, an' he war a-scoutin' surer'n death an' taxes when we everlastingly lit onter his pizen backbone."

The persons of whom Kansas Jerry was speaking were inside of old Jake's cabin when the officer's force approached.

Frank James was speculating on his brother's success in reconnoitering the mountain camp, when he saw, through the side window, the large troop of mounted men coming toward his retreat.

In the corner of the room Jim Cummings was playing cards with Dick Little, with Sam Bass as looker-on.

Poker was the game. Suddenly the quick, sharp voice of Frank James made them drop their hands in a twinkling.

"They're here, boys," were his words. "Kansas Jerry and a young army of mountaineers."

"Where?" asked Dick Little, as he grasped his rifle, and turned a pale face on Jesse James' brother.

"Coming down the hill, not three hundred yards away. Look!"

"Bust my suspenders!" exclaimed Jim Cummings, with a fierce oath, "but we're in for a rough deal now, or I'm a sucker. What's ter he did, Frank? Make a stand here, or light out fer the brush?"

"Light out."

"Dat's hit, dat's hit," eagerly assented old Jake. "Doan stay hear, Marse Frank, fer dey'll cotch you, suah."

So saying, the aged negro hobbled to the back door and opened it.

A few stunted cottonwoods stood in front of the door.

Beyond was a rocky gulch, barren of trees, which terminated at the river, some half a mile below the point at which Jesse James had made his desperate leap for life.

"You kin git in dar afore dey sees yo', Marse Frank," said old Jake, as he pointed with a shaking finger toward the gulch, "an' I'll hole 'em heah, wid some foolishness, long as I kin."

"All right."

The four outlaws were in the gulch and out of sight when Kansas Jerry and his force reined up at the front door.

The latter had not been able to take notice of the flight of the trio, for the reason that they were in a hollow at the foot of the hill, and out of sight of the cabin when Frank James and his comrades made the dash from the back door.

But the deck of cards on the floor, and the tobacco-chewing evidences which Jim Cummings had left behind, caused Kansas Jerry to come to a correct conclusion that his quarry had recently occupied the cabin.

"Which way did ther rascals go?" he asked Jake, sternly.

"Who go? Whar? What yo' gassin' erbout, Marse Jerry?"

The old negro put on a look of blank astonishment as he spoke.

"Frank James, Jim Cummings, Sam Bass, and Dick Little. Speak, you lvin' moke, or I'll knock ther stuffin' outer you in a holy jiffy."

Kansas Jerry emphasized his speech by clubbing his revolver and raising it over the trembling African's head.

"It's a po', no 'count pusson, Marse Jerry, an' I wouldn't tell a wopper ef der King ob Englum ast me. Deed I wouldn't, sah," replied old Jake, with a ludicrous earnestness that made Kansas Jerry smile in spite of himself.

Without divining that the old negro's object in withholding information concerning the whereabouts of the outlaws was to gain time, the veteran frontiersman said, with less sternness than before:

"I believe you kin spit out ther frozen truth ef it suits yer."

"Deed I kin, Marse Jerry," eagerly protested old Jake.

"Then tell me, 'thout any more monkeyin', whar Frank James has gone ter."

"Did I say dat Frank done bin yerabout?" queried Jake, with an innocent stare.

"No, yer didn't, but he's been yer, an' so has that long-legged, rattle-bones, Jim Cummings."

"So dey has, boss," replied old Jake, with a shake of his woolly head. "So dey has, an' dey made me sw'ar nebber ter tell 'bout dere bein' heah. Dat ter'ble Frank James caught ole Jake by de yeah an' jerked him to the groun', like he wasn't nuffin' but a jack rabbit. 'You brack moke o' Tofit,' he say, wid a roar dat shuck de ole cabin like hit was a yarthquake, 'ef you doan' sw'ar fer ter keep a still tongue in de middle ob yer pie-bitin' mouf, I'll cut off all yer yeahs an' feed 'em to de pigs.'"

By rapid gesticulation old Jake demonstrated how Frank James had acted.

Kansas Jerry, whose patience was well nigh exhausted with the old negro's valueless talk, and into whose brain a suspicion of Jake's intention had crept, suddenly let fly his right foot.

It caught the negro in the rear, and sent him flying into a corner of the cabin, where he lay in a huddled heap until the frontiersman roused him.

"Git up, you sneakin' imp of sheol," he harshly commanded, "an' come to ther p'int 'bout ther business. Whar did they go?"

The menacing tone in which the question was asked induced old Jake to answer quickly:

"Down de gulch."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" snapped

the angry frontiersman, as he opened the back door and looked out.

"Kase I war 'fraid dat dey'd come back an' shoot de daylight's outen me, Marse Jerry."

"Pish! I don't believe a word you say. Come, boys,"—to his men, who had been listening to his conversation with Jake in amused silence—"if they've gone up the gulch, we may get them yet."

But Kansas Jerry soon found that it was a practical impossibility to travel up the gulch on horseback.

Therefore he dismounted, and taking with him a dozen of his men, minus their animals, proceeded as rapidly as possible in the direction taken by the fleeing criminals.

The other members of the force were instructed to ride down to the river by the road which had been traversed a short time before, and there act in accordance with the judgment of the leader, a strong, wiry fellow named Curly Jones, who had been Wild Bill's partner years before, and who was fully as fearless and reckless upon occasion, as the four desperadoes who were being hunted down.

Curly Jones and his men having an easy trail to follow, arrived at the river bank several moments before the shaggy head of Kansas Jerry showed itself at the mouth of the gulch below him.

At the same time they saw their quarry upon the opposite bank.

From behind a pile of rocks rose up the forms of five men.

Four of them were the outlaws the officers had been seeking—Frank James, Jim Cummings, Sam Bass, and Dick Little.

Who was the fifth?

"Great Scott!" yelled Kansas Jerry, in amazement. "Ef it ain't Jesse James, then I'm ther biggest liar in Missouri."

He was right.

The fifth member of the party across the river was the dreaded leader of the outlaws, he who had been considered for the last hour as dead.

And yet, barring his slight wound, he was as well and as strong as when he took his desperate leap.

When Frank James and his companions reached the river shore, at the mouth of the gulch, they found Jesse sitting on a rock, applying a bandage to his wrist.

"It's lucky it's the left," he remarked, with a laugh, after he had told his story, "for otherwise I might not be able to finger a trigger for some time to come."

Jim Cummings, who had listened with open mouth to the courageous outlaw's narrative, took off his hat and made Jesse a profound bow.

"Chew me up fer a moccasin!" he exclaimed, with a fervor that made the cold, blue eyes of the man addressed sparkle with gratified pride, "but you take ther persimmon. I wouldn't venture a leap like that with a gun on my back fer ten million dollars."

"It was rather risky," returned Jesse James, quickly, "and when I struck the water my head was buzzing so from the knocks it had received that I expected to go to the bottom, kerplunk, and stay there."

But luck was with the notorious outlaw on that occasion.

The cold plunge revived him, and as he suffered no

painful injury from his fall, he was ready to make sure, powerful strokes for shore when he came to the surface again.

While the keen eyes of Kansas Jerry were scanning the water, Jesse James' head reappeared above the surface under, as it then seemed to him, the providential security of a large rock, which jutted from the shore on the same side that held his pursuers.

He could hear the conversation above him, for his ears were sharp, and when a portion of Kansas Jerry's men left their leader, and went along the bank in his direction, he immersed his head and remained under water as long as he could.

When he next used his eyes to take in the surroundings, the searchers had passed on, and were looking for evidences of his existence farther down the river.

All this time his wounded wrist had given him but little trouble.

None of the bones had been broken, as he discovered to his joy, when he was swimming under water. At last his pursuers left the river to return to the old negro's cabin.

Jesse James heard the tramp of horses' feet recede into the distance, and then cautiously crawled to the shore, and along it to the mouth of the gulch.

At this point he stopped, for the purpose of attending to his injury, and he was engaged in this work when Frank James, Jim Cummings, Sam Bass and Dick Little came up.

But little time was spent in the narration of experiences since they had separated.

"They'll return to the river, boys," said Jesse James, "when they find out that you have been at old Jake's."

He looked across the river as he spoke, and sighed.

To go down stream would be to strike open country where they would be seen and speedily overhauled.

"If we only had horses we could make our escape on this side without any trouble," said Frank James, "but as it is——"

"We'll have ter swim ther river, eh?" interrupted Jim Cummings.

"Yes."

"All right. Then here goes."

Holding his rifle above his head, the long-limbed outlaw plunged into the water.

His companions speedily followed him.

All were expert swimmers, and were across the stream and ensconced behind a pile of rocks on the opposite bank when Kansas Jerry and his men hove in sight.

Where the gulch joined the river the stream was at its widest, and the point which the outlaws held was out of range of the bullets of the enemy.

When Kansas Jerry discovered that the fifth member of the party was Jesse James, he brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

A mocking laugh answered the shot, for the bullet had failed to reach its mark.

"Shoot away, Jerry," jeered the leader of the outlaws, "and when you get tired just kick yourself in half a dozen places for being such a blanked idiot as to suppose you could get the better of me."

"Come over here, you old hayseed, and I'll kick a new set of brains into your head," yelled Sam Bass.

"Run erway home, sonny," croaked Jim Cummings, "an' tell yer mammy she wants yer."

Kansas Jerry gritted his teeth in impotent rage.

While he stood on the bank glaring at the defiant outlaws, Curly Jones whispered a few words into his ear.

The veteran frontiersman nodded his head without looking at his lieutenant.

Curly Jones and a half a dozen of the posse rode rapidly away a moment later.

Jesse James saw them depart with an odd smile.

"They are making for the ferry down the river," he said, in a low voice to Frank, "and Kansas Jerry is going to try to detain us here on some pretext or other until they have got over to this side."

As he ceased speaking, Jerry raised his voice and called out in a tone that was meant to be conciliatory:

"See here, you fellers, can't we come to some sort of an understanding?"

Jim Cummings burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Understandin' about what, you big-nosed duffer?"

"About the money you have swiped lately."

"I suppose you are willing to let us go if we'll drop the boodle on the rocks here, for you to pick up when we're gone?" interrogated Jesse James with a sarcastic grin.

"Yes, of course."

"You're a chump!" shouted Jim Cummings, as he sent a rifle bullet in Kansas Jerry's direction for fun, "an' we're dead onto yer talkin'-ergin-time racket. Eh, Jess?"

"You bet."

Kansas Jerry, with a scowling face, saw the five outlaws leave the opposite bank and run rapidly toward the timber.

"They'll escape, doggone 'em," he muttered, fiercely, "for it will be half an hour afore Curly an' his boys git across the river."

He was about to turn away and depart with the remnant of his force for the ferry, when he heard a shout and saw a sight across the stream that caused his pulse to bound exultingly.

The James boys and their followers were confronted by a new danger.

Coming toward them, from the woods where they had hoped to find shelter, were a dozen mounted men.

They formed the posse of outlaw hunters which Karl Hastings had left behind at Avilla.

Kansas Jerry saw the five desperate criminals come to a standstill, and then he dashed to the mouth of the gulch and flung himself into the water.

"I'll take a small slice of that pie myself," he muttered, in grim satisfaction, as his huge body breasted the current, "and it will be the proudest moment of my life when I salt the bacon of that foul mouthed Jim Cummings. Ther dern cuss rattled me more nor Jess."

Not having received any instructions as to what they should do, none of his men followed him, but remained on the bank as spectators of the exciting scene across the river.

It was close upon dusk, and the black clouds gathering overhead indicated that the night would be both dark and stormy.

"If we can stand 'em off for half an hour," said Jesse James to his companions, in the cool, quiet tone that he

used under the most desperate circumstances, "we are safe, for the darkness will be our friend in need."

"Stand 'em off?" snarled Jim Cummings. "Stand off a gang of horsemen, and we uns on foot. How in sheol are we a-goin' ter do it?"

"The same way we did it in Mexico, when we were pursued by the greasers. Come on."

Hastings' posse was but a few hundred yards away, but not a shot had yet been fired, owing to the apparently peaceful attitude of the outlaws.

Believing that Jesse James and his men had made up their minds to submit quietly, the odds being heavily against them, the man-hunters from Avilla were riding slowly forward, when they met with a terrible surprise.

Quick as a flash, up went five rifles, which cracked simultaneously.

Down went five of the posse, and the rest were thrown into confusion.

With a yell that recalled the old guerilla days, the James boys and their allies made a dash upon their disgruntled foes.

But there were some of the latter who had seen rough service before.

Recovering quickly from their confusion, they greeted the desperate outlaws with a fusillade of bullets.

Down went Dick Little, with a ball in his leg.

The others, by miraculous chance, escaped unhurt.

Crack! crack! went the rifles of Frank and Jesse James, Sam Bass, and Jim Cummings, and four more of the Hastings posse bit the dust.

The remainder of the man-hunters were preparing for a hand-to-hand struggle, when Kansas Jerry, with a wild yell, came rushing toward the scene of conflict.

Jesse James' broad back offered a tempting target for the frontiersman's bullet, but he disdained to take a mean advantage of the terrible outlaw.

He fired a shot, it is true, but it was for the purpose of calling the outlaw's attention to his proximity.

Jesse James' face was frightful to look upon when he saw that he was between two fires.

He might, with the assistance of his comrades, defeat the foe in front, but while engaged in that work he would be at the mercy of his relentless foe behind.

In this desperate dilemma his brain worked rapidly.

"Give 'em the devil, boys," he shouted to Frank, Bass, and Cummings, "while I attend to Jerry."

Wheeling quickly upon the words, he discharged his Winchester at the veteran frontiersman's head.

But if he was quick, Kansas Jerry was quicker.

The latter's finger was on the trigger at the moment that Jesse James turned.

The two reports rang out close together, and when the smoke cleared away, the dreaded Missouri outlaw lay stretched on the ground, with his eyes closed and the blood streaming from a wound in the head.

CHAPTER V.

THE OUTLAWS IN A TRAP.

When Jesse James fell, his brother, Sam Bass, and Jim Cummings were in the midst of the rattling *mêlée*.

Being in close quarters with the remaining members of the Karl Hastings posse, they had flung away their rifles,

and with pistol and knife were fighting like demons for the possession of the field.

On that occasion Jim Cummings showed the prodigious strength and desperate mettle of which he was possessed.

A tall mountaineer had shot Sam Bass and had his pistol leveled at Frank James' head while that cool and fearless outlaw was occupied in a hand-to-hand conflict with a brace of his foes.

Fearing to trust to his revolver, lest it might fail to avert the fatal shot, the gigantic bandit raised his bowie, which he had drawn a moment before, and, with lightning-like quickness, flung it at the man-hunter's head.

It sped to its mark with fatal accuracy, and down went Frank James' would-be slayer, with the sharp blade of the bowie buried deep in his neck.

His pistol exploded at the moment the knife struck him, but the bullet went harmlessly over Frank James' head.

Another mountaineer sprang forward to give battle to the blood-thirsty giant, when he saw his comrade fall in the throes of death.

He was the largest and the strongest of the band who had started on the campaign against the James boys under Karl Hastings' leadership, while in the manipulation of the bowie he had no superior among his acquaintances.

There was a look of vengeful triumph in his eye as he threw back the hand with his knife, for the purpose of executing the same movement which had proved so successful in Jim Cummings' case.

The long-limbed bandit was on his guard, however, and ducking his head at the instant the bowie left the muscular mountaineer's hands, he had his fingers about his enemy's throat before the latter could make effective use of his pistol.

Jim Cummings bore the mountaineer to the ground as if he had been a child instead of a powerful and heavily-built man, and was proceeding to choke him to death when he was assailed from behind by the last two members of the Hastings posse.

They had retreated to the shelter of a large tree when the outlaws began their deadly onslaught, but when they saw Kansas Jerry lay Jesse James low, their courage returned, and running forward, they threw themselves upon Jim Cummings, believing that, as his attention was fully occupied with the case of the mountaineer he had hurled to the ground, they could easily take him alive.

One of them struck the giant over the head with a clubbed revolver, and had not the blow been a glancing one, Jim Cummings might have been knocked out and made a prisoner.

The assault, as it was, had the effect of adding to his ferocity.

With one powerful blow, while still on his knees, he sent the pistol-wielder sprawling in the grass.

The next instant he was on his feet.

Avoiding the blow aimed at him by the second of his assailants, he sent out his big foot with pile-driving effect.

It caught the man-hunter in the pit of the stomach and made him seek mother earth with a howl of keenest agony.

As he went down, the mountaineer who had been

choked by the ferocious outlaw, arose unsteadily to his feet.

Jim Cummings sprang upon him, and lifting him bodily from the ground, flung him with tremendous force against a stump.

Crack! went a pistol before the big outlaw could turn to ascertain how his other victims were coming on, and a bullet scraped his shoulder.

Other reports followed so quickly that when Cummings wheeled, the spectacle that met his eyes made him shout for joy.

Frank James had succeeded in overcoming the two man-hunters who had assailed him, and was in the act of starting to the assistance of Jim Cummings, when the muzzle of a Winchester was thrust against his neck and he was called upon to surrender.

"Never to you, Kansas Jerry," was the fierce reply, and grasping the barrel of the rifle, he thrust it aside at the very moment that the veteran frontiersman's finger pressed the trigger.

The bullet passed through the flesh at the back of his neck, inflicting a slight wound, but one which bled so freely that Kansas Jerry, observing it as he locked arms with his desperate foe, became convinced that Frank James' moments were numbered.

But as he struggled with the outlaw, he began to wonder at the latter's strength.

Both were men of science and muscle, but the question of superiority was never determined, for while they were wrestling a shot was fired close to Kansas Jerry's ear, and instantly relaxing his hold on his adversary, he sank to the ground, dead, with a bullet in his brain.

His slayer was Jesse James.

Stunned, but not seriously injured by the bullet, which had plowed a ridge in his scalp, he had recovered his senses immediately after Kansas Jerry had stepped over his body to pay his respects to Frank.

When Jim Cummings faced the brothers, the two mountaineers whom he had temporarily disabled were lying dead before him.

Jesse James had killed them both.

Only three of the posse of man-hunters were alive, Jim Cummings' last victim, who lay unconscious by the stump, and the two men who had fought Frank James.

The latter were so badly used up that they could offer no resistance when the outlaws proceeded to bind their hands and feet.

Jim Cummings was in the act of performing a similar operation on the man lying by the stump, when the latter, opening his eyes, gave a gasp, a convulsive shiver, and expired.

"Now," said Jesse James, as his cold blue eyes roved over the scene of the conflict in fierce satisfaction, "we can light out for our camp with our way clear. Curly Jones and his men have crossed the ferry by this time, but we have such a start and the woods are so near that there is no danger of their coming up with us."

"Poor Sam Bass is dead, but I don't see anything of Dick Little," said Frank James, as he looked about him.

"By the great horn spoon!" ejaculated Jim Cummings, "the little snoozer has either crawled into a hole an' hauled the hole in after him, or he has gone up ter glory in the smoke of ther guns."

The ground was explored for some distance around, but Dick Little could not be found.

Not one of the three outlaws had seen him from the moment he had fallen with a bullet in his leg.

"He's a chump," pursued Cummings, with a countenance expressive of the deepest disgust. "When he hit ther ground he had his senses an' ther use of his dukes. Instid 'er helpin' us when we war in a rotten corner, Frank, what does this blamed sneak do but crawl away somewhar an' hide. But jist wait till I git my clam-hooks on ther little cur an' I'll make him see stars in ther daytime—chaw me up for a bob-tailed squirl ef I don't."

Jesse James' features were sterner than usual as he led the way to the brush.

Looking at him searchingly, Frank guessed that he suspected the missing Dick Little of something worse than cowardice.

They were well into the woods when loud cries in their rear announced that Curly Jones and his men were hot on their trail.

"Curly can have no idea where our camp is," said Jesse James to Frank, "unless Dick Little has met him and given us away."

The words had scarcely left his lips when, from a clump of bushes in front of him, emerged the form of the missing outlaw.

"Given you away," snapped Dick Little, viciously, as he limped toward his companions in crime. "If any other man than you had shot off his mouth about me in that way I would have crammed his tongue down his dirty throat."

"And why do you except me?" queried Jesse James, with a cold sneer.

"Because you saved my life once at the risk of your own," was the quick reply.

"That was nothing: I thought you were a thoroughbred, then."

Little's face flushed with anger.

"I'll make you believe I am one still," he said, with an earnestness that evoked a cool, critical stare from the leader of the outlaws, "if you'll only give me a chance to explain."

"Let's get to the camp first," was the cold rejoinder. "Then I'll hear your defense, and judge you accordingly."

"Very well."

The party reached their camp by a circuitous route, but not until the earth was shrouded in darkness.

A better spot for the retreat of a bandit could not have been found in all Missouri's hills.

It was near the summit of a rocky ridge, and at the head of a ravine impassable, except by way of a long cavern whose existence was unknown even to the oldest mountaineer in that region, owing to the perfect manner in which the mouth was concealed.

A fall from a dizzy height above had precipitated Jesse James at the entrance of the cave on an occasion when he was being hotly pressed by a band of officers some years before.

The fall had not been witnessed, and his disappearance was looked upon as the result of the evil one's agency, when a fruitless search had been made for him.

Emerging from the cave at the head of the ravine, the four outlaws found themselves in a wild spot, where rocks and brush formed a complete cover from the keenest eyes.

From this lofty position they commanded a view in the day time of the plain upon which the terrible battle of the afternoon had been fought, and of the various trails leading from it to the hills.

"If it were not for the cussed darkness," growled Jim Cummings, "we could clap our lamps on Curly Jones' outfit, an' put ourselves in a way to send 'em all to perdition as slick as goose grease."

"Don't bother about Curly Jones," said Jesse James, "for he is no more a menace to our peace now than if he were in China."

"That's so," put in Dick Little, confidently, "for this camp is the boss."

He settled himself against a rock, and drew a sigh of relief.

"Tell your story, Dick," said Frank James.

As it would be an act of folly to light a candle or a lantern, both of which articles the camp held a bountiful supply, the tale of Little's experiences, after he received his wound, was told in the darkness.

Jesse James sat by his side, a quiet and silent listener.

"When I was keeled over," he began, "I dropped my Winchester, which a big galoot of a mountaineer picked up and appropriated. 'That's all right as far as it goes,' says I to myself, 'but you don't get away with that shooter without you're able to pack a few pistol bullets in your gizzard along with it.'"

"So after I had closed my peepers and stretched out as if I had kicked the bucket, in order to pull the wool over the dern galoot's eyes. I heard him grunt and move away."

"Now was my time. He was half-way to the spot where Frank was putting in his finest licks on a couple of long-legged roosters who imagined they could chew him up and spit him out too easy for any use, when I rose up slowly and yanked out my Remington, in order to let him have it in the back. The suffering Moses, what do you think? There wasn't a cartridge in the popper, as I forgot to reload after I had last used it."

"And worse than all, I had lost my box of cartridges while swimming the blamed river."

Dick Little paused a moment for some expression of sympathy.

But as neither of his companions uttered a word, he went on, slowly:

"Maybe you think I ought to have jumped up and gone for him anyhow. But how was I to jump up with that wounded leg of mine?"

"Did the bullet break a bone?" asked Frank James, quietly.

"It must have done so, the way the leg felt then, and the way it feels now," Little petulently asserted. "Well, as it was, I couldn't be of any service to you boys in the scrimmage, so I made up my mind to crawl away toward the brush, if the opportunity offered."

"It did when Kansas Jerry shot Jesse here, and dashed past me to lay out Frank and Jim."

"While friend and foe were engaged in a life-and-death struggle, and no one had an eye for me, I made my

sneak. I got to the brush where you found me, and waited."

There was silence for some moments after he had finished. It was broken by Jesse James.

"Come with me to the cave," he said, to Dick Little, in a tone of authority. "I want to have a little private conversation with you."

To the surprise of Jim Cummings, who had taken no stock in Little's story, and who looked upon him as a traitor, the wounded outlaw responded cheerfully:

"All right, Jess. Lead the way, and I'll hobble after you."

When the two men had gone, Frank James said, with a satisfied air:

"We'll soon know whether Dick Little has been giving us a game or not."

"Think Jess will hoist ther truth outer him?"

"Yes."

"How will he do it?"

"By examining Little's wounded leg."

"I see"—with a chuckle—"and I'll bet a hundred dollars ag'in a ripe persimmon that ther wound turns out ter be a fraud."

"I am exactly of your way of thinking."

"And yet, Frank," said Cummings, as a new idea occurred to him, "why should ther little cuss act so chipper an' easy when Jess told him he wanted the pleasure of his beautiful company at ther cave?"

"Blessed if I know. Maybe he wasn't on to Jesse's game."

Five minutes passed, and Jesse James returned.

He was followed by Dick Little, who took his former position on the ground, with his back against a rock, without uttering a word.

"Well?" interrogated Jim Cummings to Jesse James. "How did you make it?"

"He's all right."

"Good! for I'd be derned sorry ter find that Dick had been playin' us."

"I examined his wound."

"And found the bones broken?" queried Frank James, quickly.

"No; but I found a bad wound just above the ankle, and it's a wonder he had the nerve to hobble up to the camp with it."

Dick Little groaned for the first time since his reunion with his comrades.

Jim Cummings now exhibited a new phase of his strange character.

"Blast it, Dick," he exclaimed, with sympathetic earnestness, as he knelt beside the wounded man and passed his large, coarse hand softly over Little's damp forehead, "but I've been a reg'lar old leather-head, a-thinkin' you'd been doin' ther baby act or wuss. You pigeon-livered or a sneak? Git out. You're a high-up dandy from Sandville, an' I kin lick ther pizen galoot that says ye ain't. I'll pack yer back to ther cave, light er dip an' fix that ankle o' your'n in great shape."

Lifting Little in his arms with the utmost tenderness the stalwart outlaw bore him to the cave, and after depositing him on a heap of straw, returned for a lantern.

Neither Jesse nor Frank James said a word while Cummings was thus occupied.

While the latter was in the cave, dressing Dick Little's wound, Frank gave expression to his thoughts.

"You pretended to be satisfied with Dick's explanation, but I can see now that you doubt him still."

"I do."

"What makes you doubt him after the evidence that the wounded leg furnished?"

"The wound was inflicted long after the fight on the plain."

"What!"

Frank James started to his feet in amazement.

"I mean what I say," responded Jesse James, quietly. "He was not hurt to amount to anything when he sneaked off and left us to fight the blood-money curs alone. The wound that disabled him was made after he reached a place of shelter."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know something of anatomy, and I have had considerable experience in surgery, as you know. Well, when I examined his leg, I found two wounds—one which passed through the flesh of the calf, the other which penetrated the muscles above the ankle."

"Well?"

"The first had not been inflicted recently, but for some time before the other. Now, we both know that Dick Little was as sound as a dollar when we crossed the river."

"Yes, that's so."

"Then he got the wound in the calf, which did not amount to a hill of beans, but which caused him to fall and act as if he had received mortal injury, when we first charged Hastings' posse. As for the other, it was received after he had left the plain, and I am fully satisfied in my own mind that it was inflicted by some one who mistook him for one of us, but who was counting upon him for help to locate us."

"He must have met this party after he got to the brush."

"Yes."

"It couldn't have been a member of Hastings' posse, for they were all engaged in the fight on the plain."

"No."

"Curly Jones was a mile behind, down the river; so it could not have been him."

"No, it was not Curly."

"Who, then, could it have been?"

"I don't know, but it won't be long before we'll be able to find out. And when we do receive the confirmation of what I suspect—what I almost know," added Jesse James, fiercely, "then I'll settle accounts with Mr. Dick Little in short order."

"I hope——"

Frank James got no further in his reply, for his words were cut short by the muffled reports of rifles.

"From the cave," hissed Jesse James, as he grasped his Winchester and sprang to his feet. "The enemy is close upon us, for Dick Little pointed out the way."

The next instant Jim Cummings came bounding toward them.

"They shot at me," he gasped, as he reached for his fle, "and how they missed doin' me up, I kain't guess."

There was no chance of retreat for the three outlaws.

The only way of egress from the camp was the cave, and that was now held by the enemy.

Above them loomed a perpendicular wall of rock, and on either side were yawning chasms, impossible of safe descent.

Crouching behind a huge boulder, they waited for the coming of the enemy.

No further shots had been fired since Jim Cummings had so precipitately left the side of Dick Little.

Suddenly a loud, clear voice was heard at the cave's mouth:

"You had better surrender," it said, "for we have got you in a trap."

"Karl Hastings!" was Jesse James' whispered ejaculation. "Now we know who it was that Dick Little met in the brush."

Then he raised his voice, and sent back this defiant answer:

"No surrender. We'll fight to the last."

CHAPTER VI.

A DETECTIVE CORNERED.

When Karl Hastings escaped from Jesse James, at the camp in the hollow, he set out for Avilla, for the purpose of meeting his posse and engaging in a new and vigorous campaign against the James gang.

Mounted on a fleet horse, he had traversed half the distance to Avilla when from a trail through the brush at the foot of the hills, he heard the sounds of firing on the plain below him.

Spurring his horse forward to ascertain the cause, he was met by Dick Little, who was running without a limp in the direction of the ravine that led to the outlaw's camp.

Throwing up his hands at sight of the detective, Little earnestly cried:

"Don't shoot, for I'm a friend."

Too late, however. Karl Hastings fired, and the shot struck Little near the ankle, and riding forward, he looked at the treacherous outlaw with eyes which expressed both suspicion and aversion. He believed in Mattie Collins, but he did not have much faith in her husband.

Little was on the ground, groaning, while the detective dismounted and disarmed him.

"Why do you say you are a friend?" queried Hastings, coldly.

"Because I want a slice of the reward offered for the arrest of Jesse and Frank James."

"Your raids lately haven't been very profitable, then?"

"They have panned out well enough, but I'm tired of the life of an outlaw, and am willing to retire, if I can do so safely, and with a neat little stake."

The firing on the plain had ceased some moments before, otherwise Karl Hastings might not have stopped to hear what his captive had to say for himself.

"I can lead the James boys and Jim Cummings into a trap within the next hour," said Little, with a positiveness that the detective believed to be genuine.

"How?"

Little gave the location of the mountain camp, and explained the peculiar route by which it was reached.

"The camp is a regular *cul-de-sac*," he added, "and

there's no way of escape for the gang once you have your proper position in the cave."

"Where are the James boys now?" asked Hastings.

Little pointed to the plain.

"They're there," he said, "and as the shooting has come to an end, it is ten to one that they have won the fight."

The tale he told regarding the events of the afternoon both shocked and thrilled the detective.

He was for riding forward at once and giving battle to the outlaws single-handed, but a few words from Dick Little restrained him.

"Don't make a fool of yourself," the little rascal said, "but hide in the bushes and you'll see 'em come along on their way to the camp."

Hastings nodded his head.

Then, as a noise a short distance in his front warned him that his quarry was probably approaching, he exchanged a few rapid words with Dick Little, and then led his horse into the bushes and waited.

When he caught sight of the faces of the three outlaws who had slain so many members of his posse, he could scarcely restrain his impulse to open fire upon them.

"But no," was his aforethought, "such a proceeding would be rash. I might send one to his account, but the others would likely close in and settle me. I'll take Dick Little's advice, and give them a fight to the death in another place."

When the four desperadoes had gone, Hastings emerged from his place of concealment, mounted his horse, and rode to the scene of the bloody conflict.

It was dark when he reached the plain.

But two of his men were found alive, and these were the ones who had attacked Frank James, and had afterward been bound hand and foot to prevent their escaping and giving the alarm.

The detective released them, and was engaged in an interesting conversation when Curly Jones and his troop rode up.

Karl Hastings hailed the appearance of the man-hunters with joy.

"Now," he exclaimed, "we can give these fiends battle in their pocket of a camp with the certainty of coming out victorious."

Curly Jones, when he had heard the detective's story, was eager to begin the pursuit at once.

"They'll likely stay in their camp all night," he said, "an' perhaps it would be ther wiser plan ter tackle 'em in 'ther mornin', just at daybreak. But they've killed Kansas Jerry, the whitest man in Missouri, an' I'm just achin' ter avenge his death. I'll fight 'm in the dark and I'll give 'em odds rather than miss the chance of meeting 'em."

The detective was equally impatient to start, and the party, now numbering ten men, all told, rode through the brush and up the ravine to a point a short distance from the entrance to the cave.

They were near the mouth, and moving along cautiously, when looking around the last of the many turnings, they beheld Jim Cummings kneeling beside Dick Little.

A lighted lantern stood on the floor of the cavern close by.

Curly Jones, who had assumed command of the force of pursuers, at Hastings' request, instantly gave the order to fire.

But not a bullet struck the long-limbed outlaw.

He heard the order, and quick as a flash fell flat on his face.

The next moment he was out of the cave, and running toward his comrades.

Dick Little was shaking with fright when Curly Jones and Karl Hastings reached his side.

The riflemen had aimed at Cummings' head, and not a bullet had come within two feet of Little, and yet the firing had given him the cold shivers.

"You were quick in coming," he chattered, as he looked up at the detective. "But I reckon it's all right."

"Are the James boys in the camp?" asked Curly Jones.

"Yes."

"Then we'll open the ball at once. Hastings, give 'em a little talk before we begin."

The detective got behind a rock at the mouth of the cave, and called upon the outlaws to surrender.

Jesse James' reply has been given.

Curly Jones was in favor of dashing out of the cave and fighting at close quarters in the open.

"The moment they know you are outside," objected Dick Little, "they'll have you at a terrible disadvantage, for, intrenched behind rocks, they can riddle you without incurring any danger themselves."

"I thought you said we'd have them in a trap if we got them where they are now," said Karl Hastings, in some heat.

"They are in a trap," returned Little, coolly, "but you'll have to wait until morning to discover it."

"Hang waiting till morning," said Curly Jones, angrily. "I'm goin' ter give 'em a rattle to-night."

"Morning will show you," rejoined Little, "that you can kill them all without running any risk. There are only two places where they can shelter their bodies, and you can move on them by a way I shall point out."

"Show us the way now," interrupted the impatient Jones.

"They'll change their positions in the darkness without your knowing it, and give you the hottest kind of a reception. However——"

A shout from the camp made him pause in his speech.

"Why don't you fellers start in with yer rat-killin'," called out Jim Cummings, jeeringly. "We're just achin' fer a scrap, an' you are jist actin' like a passel of blamed cowards—afraid of yer own shadders. Rats!"

Curly Jones fired a shot at random.

A yell of derision greeted the report.

"Try it ag'in, sonny," came Cummings' voice, "a little more practice an' yer might be able ter hit a door, if yer had a flock of barns ter blaze away at."

"Come out here and show your mettle," cried Jesse James, in a harsh, derisive tone, "or else go back and confess yourselves chumps."

This was more than Curly Jones could stand.

Calling upon his men to follow him, he sprang into the open and began firing in the direction whence the sound of the voices had come.

Three of his men followed.

The quick return volley of the three outlaws sent two

of the men to the ground, one dead and the other seriously wounded.

Curly Jones was about to move forward and try his chances in a hand-to-hand conflict, when a woman's voice, crying out these beseeching words, reached his ears:

"Come back hyar! come back hyar, an' don't shoot any more. I want'er say suthin' to yer."

"Do as she says," followed Karl Hastings' clear voice. "Come back for a moment, Jones."

The detective had hastened after the intrepid leader of the posse, but had scarcely stepped a foot beyond the cavern's mouth when he heard swift steps behind him.

As he turned quickly, a woman's hand seized his arm and then came this panting whisper:

"Oh, Mesta Detective, I'm pow'ful glad I've found yer. Come right inside hyar, quick, an' call yer men back."

The newcomer was Molly Culdán.

The detective did not ask her how she came to such a place at such a time, but, carried away by her vehemence, retreated at once into the cave.

As she followed him the shots were fired which laid two members of the posse low.

Then it was that she called out to Curly Jones.

When the latter got back to the cave his face was flushed with angry disappointment.

"Who are you?" he harshly exclaimed, "that orders me to come back when I had the James boys in the door?"

"I am a gal that goes a heap on Jesse James," was the prompt, decided answer.

"And you want me to let up on him because he has done you a favor, eh?"

"Yes," she said, coolly.

"Well, I won't, for he's a thievin', murderin' brute, and deserves a thousand deaths."

"But yer shan't kill him, all ther same," she coldly returned.

"How will you prevent me, Miss Impertinence?" he asked, with a sneer.

"In this hyar way——"

She was about to dart past him into the open, but Karl Hastings caught her arm and forcibly restrained her.

"You must not go out," he protested, "for it would be to court certain death."

"I don't keer. You may kill Jesse James, but if you do you'll have to kill me, too."

The detective sighed.

"Your trust in this man is misplaced," he said, in a low voice, intended for her ear alone. "He is a wretch, and we are but acting in the best interests of society in hunting him down."

"I don't want'er listen ter any moril truck," was Molly Culdán's half-angry reply. "An' you'll obleege me," she added, "by allowin' me ter do as I please."

"Not if that course threatens to lead to death," said Hastings, gravely.

"Molly!" called out Jesse James, from without. "Is that you?"

"I reckon," was the quick answer, "and they shan't worrit yer while I am on deck."

"Shan't they?" growled Curly Jones. "We'll see."

He spoke a few words in a whisper to his men, and a second move forward was immediately afterward made.

Molly Culdán uttered a scream of mingled rage and despair as they marched out, and strove with all her might to wrench herself from Karl Hastings' detaining grasp.

The young man felt himself to be in the most uncomfortable position of his life.

He wanted to be the friend and comforter of the spirited girl who had so powerfully attracted him at their sensational meeting in the morning, yet his stern sense of duty could not permit him to utter a protest against the plan of Curly Jones.

While he stood irresolutely by her side, Jesse James gave him the cue for action.

The bandit had construed Molly Culdán's scream to mean that she was in peril.

Regardless of the danger, he leaped from behind the huge rock where he had been stationed, and started for the mouth of the cave.

Frank James and Jim Cummings, not to be outdone in reckless daring, came close behind him.

"I'll come to you, Molly," cried the leader of the outlaws, in clear, ringing tones, "If I have to march over the dead body of every man who opposes me."

"Don't," came her quick reply, "fer nuthin's a-hurtin' me."

Then shot after shot rang out, mingled with the cries and groans of the wounded and dying.

Releasing his hold on the girl when the battle was reopened, Karl Hastings was out of the cavern in a twinkling.

Molly Culdán quickly followed him.

She could distinguish neither friend nor foe in the darkness, and was feeling her way blindly toward the farther end of the camp, when a sharp pain in the side seized her, and she sank fainting to the ground.

When she opened her eyes she saw Karl Hastings bending over her, with a lantern in his hands.

Her first words amazed him exceedingly:

"Whar is Jesse James?" she faintly inquired. "Did he git erway?"

"Yes"—coldly—"he escaped."

"And Frank, too?"

"Yes. Jim Cummings was the only one who was captured, and the boys wouldn't have got him if he had not been desperately wounded."

A pause.

Then she asked, softly:

"You're all right, ain't yer?"

"Yes. I escaped without a scratch."

"An' ther fellers with yer?"

"Curly Jones and three others are alive."

She closed her eyes and sighed.

"I'm drefful sorry," she said, presently.

"Sorry for what?"

"That thar was any killin'."

Then she added, as if the thought had just occurred to her:

"I was hit somewhar, wern't I?"

"No. A bullet struck the steel belt which you wear. The shock caused you to faint."

"Shucks! I'm ashamed o' myself. Floppin' like a

tenderfoot. But I'm glad I warn't hit, though, for now I can get home for ther funeral."

"You have a long journey before you."

"It's middlin' fur, but then I left my horse down at the mouth of ther ravine."

Hastings, who was curious to know why Molly had come to the robbers' camp at night, now asked this question:

"Did you go straight home when I left you yesterday?"

"That's what I did."

"What caused you to come here?"

"I war afeared that Jesse James 'ud be hard pressed, an' I had a kind of a sneakin' idee that I mout be able ter help him. Besides, I didn't like to stay home with mother dead, an' ther house full o' naburs."

"You have been here before, then?"

"Why, of course. I know ther place like a book."

She seemed so honest and she spoke so frankly and unaffectedly that he felt his heart warm toward her, unlettered though she was.

"She is only an unsophisticated girl," he said to himself, "who has been loyal to the man who was a friend to her mother in time of need."

With this estimate of her character, he was ready to find excuses for her conduct.

In a short time they were on their way through the cave.

They met no one during their journey.

"I reckon Dick Little went off with ther James boys," she said.

"No. He accompanied Curly Jones and his men to Avilla."

Then he told her the part Little had played at the camp.

She made no comment.

Arrived at the spot where her horse had been tethered, she was surprised and angry to find it gone.

It would be impossible to reach her home on foot in time for the funeral.

"You may ride my animal," the detective said.

"Much obleeged," she impulsively returned.

But when Hastings looked for his horse in the thicket where it had been left, he could find no trace of it.

"Stolen by the thief who appropriated yours," was his quick conclusion.

Molly Culdán vented her rage in a manner that made the detective frown.

But she soon burst into tears, and her distress was so acute that Hastings resolved to procure her a horse at whatever hazard.

"If you are not afraid to remain here," he said kindly, "I will hurry on to the nearest house and get a horse for you."

"Me afeared? I war born in the woods, an' I'm afeared o' nuthin'. But if you get me a horse, so I kin git home in time, I'll be yer friend forever."

"I will do my best."

He was gone several hours, and it was daylight when he returned on horseback to the spot where he had parted with dashing Molly Culdán.

She was not there.

He called her name loudly, and searched for some

time in the vicinity, even going as far as the robbers' camp.

All in vain.

"Perhaps she got tired of waiting," was his thought, "and took the trail for home, hoping to meet some kindly disposed horseman, or some friend who would assist her in making the journey in time."

With this idea in his mind, Hastings rode rapidly in the direction of Molly Culdán's mountain home.

The house was situated at the base of a spur of the hills he was now leaving, and by good riding, he expected to reach it in three hours.

The funeral of Mrs. Culdán had been set for ten o'clock.

Without having met the girl, or learned anything concerning her whereabouts, Karl Hastings arrived in front of the house at half-past nine.

There were half a dozen mountaineers congregated on the little porch, while the forms of three or four women could be seen through the open door moving about inside.

The detective dismounted and walked toward the group of men.

He had opened his mouth to speak to one of them, an old man, with a bald head and a long, flowing, white beard, when Jesse James suddenly appeared, coming from the side of the house.

He had his Winchester in his hand, but he made no aggressive movement when he saw his enemy.

On the contrary, he demanded in an anxious voice:

"Where's Molly?"

Karl Hastings put his hand to his revolver, as he answered, coolly:

"I don't know."

"You lie!"

The words were hissed out fiercely, and at the same moment Jesse James raised his rifle.

"Hands up!" shouted a voice from the detective's rear. "We've got the drop this time."

The speaker was Frank James.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT CURLY JONES FOUND.

Had it not been for the darkness, Jesse and Frank James might not have escaped from their mountain camp.

Knowing every turn and corner of the place, they made a dash for the mouth of the cave, where Jim Cummings fell.

Jesse James did not think of Dick Little until he emerged from the cave and mounted his horse.

"He wasn't in the place where I left him, and where he must have been when Hastings and Curly Jones came up," he remarked, "so it's likely that he crawled into the open when the fight commenced, knowing there was not much danger of his swallowing a leaden pill, so long as he kept flat on his stomach."

This surmise was correct.

Dick Little had crawled out of the cave when Molly Culdán left it, and he was near her when she fainted.

After the fight he went with Curly Jones and his men, leaving Karl Hastings to look after Molly.

Finding the girl's horse a few rods from the place

where the animals of the officer's posse had been tethered, he coolly appropriated it, and then turned Hastings' horse loose, while Curly Jones and his three companions were riding toward the plain.

His object in playing this trick on the detective will be explained later on.

Jesse James had made up his mind to attend Mrs. Culdán's funeral, and he and Frank were concealed in the brush near the house when Karl Hastings rode up.

The leader of the outlaws placed but one interpretation upon the absence of Molly.

Karl Hastings had hidden her away somewhere, and from the worst of motives.

Advancing toward the detective with a ferocious look, Jesse James said, in a voice of suppressed passion:

"I've a good mind to kill you where you stand."
 "Don't," urged Frank James. "Give him a chance to explain."

Karl Hastings gazed defiantly at the enraged bandit before him, but did not open his mouth to speak.

Jesse James gritted his teeth as he returned the gaze.

There was a short silence, and then he said, with his old-time, quiet manner:

"Take his weapons away, Frank, and then we'll tie him up."

The detective resolved, in spite of the odds against him, to make an attempt to escape.

No assistance from the mountaineers on the porch could be counted on, for each man had his face averted.

"They're all friends of mine," remarked Jesse James, as he noted Hastings' glance toward the men, "except one, and he has promised to keep his hands out of my affairs until the funeral is over. Isn't that so, Bill?"

A short, red-bearded man, who was smoking a cob pipe at the end of the porch, answered gruffly:

"Yes."
 "He's Mrs. Culdán's half-brother, and he don't like me worth a cent," Jesse James went on, with a chuckle. "But he is dead gone on Molly, and for her sake he has agreed to mind his own business for an hour or two. And Bill Early is a man of his word."

The red-bearded man's eyes flashed ominously as the bandit spoke, but he did not give audible expression to the feelings that agitated his breast.

Frank James now approached the detective, to carry out his brother's order, when, with lightning-like quickness, Hastings turned and struck the outlaw a sledge-hammer blow behind the ear.

As Frank James went down, the detective whipped out his pistol, when—

Crack! went Jesse James' Winchester, and Hastings uttered a loud cry, and sank bleeding to the earth.

Bill Early rose to his feet with a savage imprecation when he saw the detective fall, but a few quick words from the young man's assailant caused him to resume his seat.

"He is Molly's enemy," Jesse James said, "and he has spirited her away somewhere."

"Then do as you please with him," was the fierce reply, "for I've got no call to interfere."

Ten minutes after Frank and Jesse James had dragged the insensible detective away, the minister appeared.

He was an old man, a superannuated preacher, who lived in a little cabin a mile away with his wife.

Ten o'clock came, and the funeral services were progressing, when the James boys reappeared.

The old minister frowned when he saw them, but he did not stop his sermon.

At last the rude coffin was borne from the house and deposited in Bill Early's wagon.

Frank and Jesse saw the *cortège* move off, and then they went inside the house and sat down.

"We'll wait half an hour, and then if Molly doesn't turn up, we'll have it out with Hastings," said Jesse.

"He's about dead as it is," was his brother's response.

"He'll be dead sure enough when I've done with him."

The half hour went by, and Molly had not presented herself.

The James boys left this characteristic note for Bill Early when they departed:

"We've gone to finish up our little job of the morning. Keep a still mouth, or you'll wake up some fine night and find yourself in shoel."

Mrs. Culdán's half-brother was reading the note upon his return to the house, an hour later, when Molly rushed in out of breath.

Early looked up in amazement.

"Is the funeral over?" she panted.

"Yes."

She sank into a chair, and buried her face in her hands.

"Where have you been?" asked Early, after a pause.

"Fightin' a scoundrel an' a coward," she answered, with a face crimsoned with wrath and shame.

"Karl Hastings?"

"No; he's white."

Bill Early regarded her in astonishment bordering on stupefaction.

"Not the detective?" he ejaculated.

"No; the man who kep' me back war that squint-eyed wretch, Dick Little."

Bill Early arose to his feet and began nervously to pace the floor.

Watching him intently, Molly saw that he was powerfully moved.

That it was not wholly on her account she was convinced.

"What's got inter you? What's been a happening?" she eagerly inquired.

"I have made a blamed fool of myself," he snapped, "and if somebody would be kind enough to kick me from here to Jericho, I would be much obliged."

Her quick tuition grasped the truth.

"Ther detective—he's in some danger?" she interrogated, her face growing suddenly pale.

"He is in the worst pickle a man could possibly be in," was the gloomy response.

"Shure ernuff?"

"Yes."

"Whar is he?" she said, with her dark eyes turned imploringly upon his face.

"In the hands of Jesse James, who has sworn to kill him."

She uttered a groan of despair.

"Read that," said Early, remorsefully, "and you'll understand what has by this time taken place."

He placed in her hands the note written by Jesse James.

Molly Culdán read it hurriedly, and her heart sank.

"Dead!" she moaned, "and he the only man I ever tuk a liken to!"

Bill Early gazed at her with compassionate eyes.

"Perhaps they haven't killed him yet," he ventured to say, as a bit of consolation.

She caught at the hope as a drowning man would catch at a straw.

"Do you know whar they went?" she asked, eagerly.

"No."

"But the direction—you must a-noticed which road they took?"

"They went into the woods."

"Then I know whar ter find 'em."

She ran to the door, then turned and looked at Early, doubtfully.

"I don't know whether it'll be safe fer you to go 'long with me or not."

"It is not safe," he promptly rejoined, "but I'll go with you all the same."

"No," as her mind quickly reviewed the situation, "yer mustn't go. I kin manage Jesse James alone."

"I believe you can."

"I won't fool erway any time while I'm gone."

"You will find me here when you come back. My horse is in the wagon. I'll unhitch and put on the saddle, and you can go mounted."

She thanked him with her eyes, and was soon speeding along the trail which the James boys had taken less than two hours before.

Bill Early sat down in the porch and gave himself up to gloomy reflections.

He was puffing away at his cob pipe when Curly Jones and two members of the posse rode up.

Dick Little, strapped to a horse led by the third member of Jones' force, appeared a few minutes later.

When Early saw Little his countenance took on an expression of ferocious joy.

"If you'll turn that skunk over to me," he said, with eyes blazing with murderous wrath, "I'll save the county a job."

"He'll get his desserts, never fear, Bill," returned Curly Jones, with quiet decision.

"Do you know what he's done?"

"Yes; I came up with my boys while he was struggling with your niece, and if I hadn't been quick with my gun, he would have plunged a knife in her heart."

Bill Early strode forward to where Dick Little's horse was, his face a picture of ungovernable fury, and would have assaulted the prisoner then and there if Curly Jones had not quickly dismounted and interfered.

Taking the wrathful Early by the arm, he led him back to the porch.

"Ease down, Bill," was his quiet advice, "for I'll see that he is punished. He is a double traitor, and his doom is sealed."

Early took his former seat, grumblingly.

"You saw what occurred?" he queried, after he had swallowed his wrath. "Tell me all about it."

Jones drew up a chair to the side of Molly's uncle, and began his story.

"I had a scrap with the James boys at their camp. You've already heard about that, I reckon."

"Yes."

"Well, after allowing Jesse and Frank to escape, I started through the cave to catch them up, if possible, taking Jim Cummings, who had been shot in the lung and in half a dozen other places, along with me.

"After we had been gone an hour without finding out in which direction the James boys had gone, I made up my mind to tie Cummings to a tree and start for this place. You see, the funeral occurred to me, and with it the possibility of these dare-devils, Jesse and Frank, would be in attendance.

"I took a cut-off to get here, and an hour after daylight I came into a grove of hickory trees at the foot of a hill to hear a woman's scream and a man's hoarse, savage voice.

"Spurring my horse forward, I entered an open space to see Molly Culdán struggling in the arms of Dick Little.

"She was making a desperate fight for her life, but his knife would have found her heart, if I had not blazed away in the nick of time and spoiled his aim.

"My men came up in time to help me disarm Little, and strap him on a horse—Karl Hastings' horse, by the way."

"How did you come by the animal?"

"It had not been in my possession. Little had it. The wretch had found the animal after he got out of the cave and turned it loose. He was jealous of the detective, and wanted your niece for himself."

Bill Early clenched his hands and swore a frightful oath.

"Little was then riding Molly's horse, which he had stolen, but after he had gone a short distance the animal stepped in a squirrel hole and lamed itself.

"Little then shot it dead and pursued his journey on foot, limping painfully as he went, and he would probably have never met your niece if he hadn't had the devil's luck to run across Hastings' nag again.

"Mounting it, he started for Avilla, intending to overtake me if he could, but he had proceeded but a short distance when he met your niece, who was hurrying along through the woods toward her home.

"It was from the lips of Molly that I learned what happened after she came upon him.

"Her first impulse was to fly, but when the scoundrel assured her that he held Karl Hastings' life in his hands, she stopped and permitted him to dismount.

"Where is Mr. Hastings?" she asked.

"Half a mile from here, in a hickory grove."

"A prisoner?"

"No; he fell in with the James boys, and is wounded. I found him stretched senseless on the ground, and, after I had brought him to, I started off for assistance."

"Take him to my house," she urged. "It is the nearest place."

"All right," he said, and, at his suggestion, she mounted behind him and they rode toward the grove.

"Arrived there, they dismounted, and Little secured Hastings' horse to a tree.

"When they had searched the place without finding the detective, Little sought to make her believe that he had crawled away.

"I don't believe it," she said; "you have deceived me." "Then Little threw off his mask and coolly informed her that she was in his power, and that he had lured her to the grove for an infamous purpose.

"But I will be as humble as you please," the cowardly wretch said, "if you'll consent to marry me. Martha Collins thinks she is my wife, but she ain't. If you will catch with me," he added, "I'll make up with Jesse James and deliver Curly Jones and his men into his hands."

"Instead of answering him, she turned to fly, but he caught her around the waist, and wounded as he was, forced her to the ground.

"But she managed, by desperate struggling, to get on her feet again, and was giving him the hardest kind of a fight—look at his face and neck and you'll see the marks—when in savage rage he drew his knife to murder her. At this juncture I appeared.

"After she had told her story, I asked her to mount behind me, assuring her that I would take her home, but she refused, and while we were tying up Little, she suddenly disappeared. I immediately guessed why she left so unceremoniously. She wanted to hurry on to the house and warn Jesse James of our coming. Strange girl, Molly. As pretty as a picture, as honest as the day is long, and as true as steel to her friends. It's a blamed shame that one of her friends is Jesse James."

"So I think," returned Bill Early.

"Where is she now?"

Molly's uncle sprang to his feet with an oath.

"Gone to save Karl Hastings from a terrible death, and here we are sitting calmly and allowing the precious moments to pass. I've got no time to explain," he went on hurriedly. "All I can say is that if the detective isn't a fool already, he stands a right smart chance of bein' one this very minute. Follow me, and I'll lead you to Jesse James' lair, if I can."

Fortunately, the trail was soon found, and as it had recently rained and the ground was soft, the tracks of the law's horses were easily discovered and followed.

But the journey was a long one, and it was not ended when night came.

The pursuers had penetrated far into the hills when darkness set in, but, as the trail was warm, they resolved to follow it with torches.

At midnight a startling discovery was made by Curly Jones.

Pinned to the trunk of a large sycamore, on one side of the trail, near a water course, a large card of a St. Louis whisky firm was found, with these words, written in bold hand, upon the blank surface:

Karl Hastings has paid the penalty of his crime. Seek to find his remains, for they are now but a handful of bones. He met his fate an hour ago, and they who seek revenge him will follow him to Satan's hot-house as fast as the stars shine."

There was no signature, but both Curly Jones and Bill Early recognized the peculiar chirography of Jesse James.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SENSATIONAL ROBBERY.

The mansion of Marcus Lafitte, the rich planter and capitalist, stood on a slight elevation, about a mile from

the railroad, and in one of the most picturesque sections of Southwestern Missouri.

The long, broad, smooth avenue leading from the entrance to the grounds about the house was bordered with magnolias; while the noble structure itself, which, having been erected both for beauty and convenience, combined the best points in several styles of architecture, was surrounded by handsome trees, the palm, the cork elm, and the catalpa leading in point of number.

Two days after the funeral of Mrs. Cushman, Frank James and Sam Bass were cooking supper on the banks of a small stream five miles from the Lafitte mansion.

Bass, who was a typical border desperado, tall, lank, and muscular, had been left for dead in the fight with Kansas Jerry's men. He had only been stunned by a bullet, however, and recovered his senses after the opposing parties had gone.

It was not until two days later that he found the James boys.

But before finding his comrades he came upon Jim Cummings, lashed to a tree, and suffering the keenest agonies from numerous wounds he had received in the conflict of the night before.

Bass released him, attended to his injuries as best he could, put him on his horse, and conducted him to the cabin of a relative in the hills, and then continued his journey.

He had a shrewd idea that they would seek another of their mountain retreats, and on his way there was so fortunate as to meet them.

"You couldn't have dropped down on us at a better time, Sam," said Jesse James, "for we are short two men, since Dick Little jumped the game and Jim Cummings tried to make a seive out of himself."

"I feel about as pert as a couple of ordinary mugs," returned Bass, as he crooked his elbow to show the hard knots of muscle in his long arm, "and if you have any paying snap on the books, count me in for a stayer. And whatever my portion of the swag may be," he added, "I'll divvy up square with Jim."

Jesse James shook his head sadly.

"We'll never see Jim again, I'm afraid," he said, "for the coppers have got him, and they'll railroad him to the gallows."

Sam Bass smiled.

"I reckon not," he quietly replied.

And then he told them where the long-limbed bandit was, at which news they were much delighted.

Bass knew nothing about Molly Cushman, Dick Little or the movements of the officers.

Concerning Karl Hastings' fate, Jesse James uttered not a word.

"That's my private affair," he said to himself, "and, for the present I'll keep that little matter to myself."

During the day the plan for the raid on Lafitte's mansion was arranged.

The grand reception and ball was to take place on that evening.

The three outlaws were within sight of the railroad station nearest Lafitte's when the late afternoon train brought its carload of invited guests. Jesse James' cold blue eyes glistened with fierce delight as he saw the carriages driven away.

"We'll make the biggest haul of the year," he said, "and I don't think we'll meet much opposition, for they'll be a lot of frightened cattle when we show up and begin work."

"I don't know about that," slowly responded Sam Bass, "for I saw a mug get into one of the carriages who used to work for Pinkerton."

"What! a detective!" exclaimed Frank James, with a face that betrayed disgust and disappointment.

"No, he's not a detective now. He is the governor's private secretary."

"Came along to represent the governor, I reckon," said Frank James, "for I don't see his noble jags' face in the procession."

"Probably."

"I'll take care of him," remarked Jesse James, grimly, "and if he tries to be ugly, I'll create an immediate vacancy in the office he holds."

"You'll have to be mighty spry in dealing with Luke Hastings, old boy, for he has a quick eye, and is as handy with his gun as you are."

"Hastings!" repeated the leader of the outlaws, slowly, and with a significant side glance at his brother. "No relation to Karl Hastings, is he?"

"His brother."

"The deuce you say."

Jesse James gazed moodily at the ground.

Frank, who saw a look of curiosity on Sam Bass' face, was quick to change the subject.

"Come, let us stir our stumps, and get to the river. It isn't safe to be monkeying about here."

An hour later they were at the river, where they remained until after dark.

Oppinger's celebrated band, from St. Louis, was playing a march when Frank and Jesse James and Sam Bass reined up their horses in front of the wide gate.

Dismounting, they secured their animals to the fence, and then boldly entered the inclosure.

Each man had his part assigned to him, and when they arrived at a point half-way down the avenue, where it was intersected by two garden paths, they separated.

Jesse James walked straight forward, leaving Frank and Bass to work the side entrances to the mansion.

Upon the wide veranda, three gentlemen sat smoking their cigars; one of them was Luke Hastings, the private secretary of the governor.

He was a few years older than his brother, and closely resembled him in form and feature.

Paul de Grassim, a recent arrival from France, and reported to be a multi-millionaire, was on his right, while General Newson, an ex-Confederate soldier, and a typical Southern gentleman of the old school, occupied a chair at his left.

"No, sah," the general was saying when Jesse James arrived within hearing distance, "there's no chance of catching these dare-devils as long as the country people give them aid and comfort. And it's a burning shame, say I, that such a state of affairs should be permitted to exist, sah, in the Sunny South."

"Ees zee James boys—all—what you call giants—magnifique in proportion, wiz zee strength of Hercules?" interrogated the Frenchman.

"Some say," replied Luke Hastings, with a smile,

"that they are seven feet high, and that they can wring an ordinary man's neck with one twist of the hand."

"*Sacre!* but say must be zee terrors vich are holy, mon sieurs. I hope zat I don't have zem interview me som dark of zee night."

The Frenchman was a little man, with a pale, thin face and an enormous mustache.

"If I should see Jesse James, sah," said the general sternly, "and he should ask me to deliver over my valuables, I would tell him, sah, to his face, to go to the hell place, sah."

"General, I'll trouble you for your watch and money."

The voice came from the steps of the veranda, a few feet from where the general was sitting, and it was cold and menacing.

The veteran of the Civil War looked up with a start.

The electric lights that blazed through the open door of the mansion lit up the pale, strongly marked face of the speaker, and showed with alarming distinctness the stern expression which animated it.

"Well, I'll be everlastingly tomcoddled," the general ejaculated, "if it isn't Jesse James."

"Correct, my dear sir," was the quiet rejoinder, "and you'll save yourself a heap of trouble, and be doing Mr. Newson a service, by coming at once to the center."

The general was about to put his hand in his pocket for the purpose of drawing out his purse when he caught this low whisper from Luke Hastings:

"Don't give him a cent. Keep still, and let me deal with him."

Jesse James did not hear the words, but he readily conjectured what had been said.

Advancing up the steps, until he stood directly in front of General Newson, and within a few feet of Luke Hastings, he presented a brace of revolvers with the harsh command:

"Up with your hands, Mr. Private Secretary, or you goes your North American light."

Luke Hastings had his hand on his revolver when the bandit began speaking, and when he finished he suddenly whipped it out and blazed away.

Jesse James dodged, and the bullet struck the Frenchman in the fleshy part of the arm.

With a howl that could have been heard a quarter of a mile away, the representative of frog eaters and wealth dropped flat on his back and began to kick and squirm as if possessed by a legion of imps.

Quick upon the heels of Hastings' action came the sharp crack! crack! of Jesse James' pistols, and the private secretary tumbled over to the floor of the porch mortally wounded.

As for General Newson, that bullet-scarred veteran of the Civil War, he simply looked on with wide-open mouth.

"Now, general," said Jesse James, coldly, as he saw that two of the occupants of the porch were done for, "I'll thank you for your purse, rings, and watch."

As he spoke a number of frightened faces looked out of the front door.

"Back, every one of you," shouted the bandit, "or send a shower of bullets into your midst."

There was an instant scampering of feet.

General Newson was handing over his valuables when several shots from the rear of the house were heard.

They were followed by the piercing screams of women.

Hastily thrusting the plunder into his pocket, Jesse James dashed through the front door and into the house.

In the drawing-room he found a group of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen huddled together in a corner.

Before them stood Sam Bass, with a revolver in each hand.

"I shot outside to scare 'em," he said, rapidly, to Jesse James, when the latter appeared, "and now that I have got 'em corraled we'll go through 'em in three shakes of a lamb's tail."

The ladies were the first to receive attention.

One society belle from Jefferson City was found to possess a tiara of diamonds worth a small fortune, besides other jewelry upon her person.

She had not worn her treasures for several years, in reference to the popular taste, which in her set demanded simplicity in ornament; but on this occasion she had yielded to the advice of her father, who thought her value in the matrimonial market would be vastly enhanced by a lavish display of costly gems.

She gave up her treasures with a proudly indignant face and turned up her fine Grecian nose when Jesse James offered to give back the tiara.

"No," she scornfully returned, "take them all. They're more of value to you than they are to me."

The pockets of the two bandits bulged out with plunder when they left the room.

"Where's Frank?" asked Jesse James, when they found themselves in the hall.

"In old Lafitte's study, experimenting with the treasure box, I reckon."

Sam Bass led the way to the room, which opened out from one of the sleeping apartments.

When they reached the open doorway they beheld a ghastly sight. Frank James lay stretched senseless upon the floor, and over him stood a hard-faced woman of giant stature, with a huge club in her hands.

"You'll rob us, you murthurin' omadhaun, will yez," he was saying when the two outlaws came up. "You'll come shneakin' into the masher's stooody wid yer rayvolvers an' yer schalpin' knives, will yez? Sure an' I think yez won't, ye big-mouth thafe av the wirruld. Bad cess to the thavin' loikes av yez, take that, an' charge it to Norah McFadden."

The club would have come down on the unconscious bandit's head, had not Jesse James sprung forward and caught her by the arm.

But if he thought he could easily master her he soon found out his mistake.

Turning upon him with the strength and fury of an enraged tigress, she dropped her club and seized him round the waist with a grip of iron.

The bold and muscular bandit struggled with all his might to free himself from the enraged Irishwoman's powerful grasp, while Sam Bass looked on an amused spectator. His amusement changed to dismay and fear when he saw Norah release her hold on her adversary and draw a dagger from her bosom.

Crack! came a pistol-shot quick upon her movement,

and she dropped the dagger with a cry of pain and staggered back against the wall.

Her wrist had been shattered by Sam Bass' bullet.

Jesse James wrapped his handkerchief tightly about the wound, she submitting with a bad grace, and he told Bass to keep an eye on her while he finished operations in the room.

Stooping over his brother, he was rejoiced to observe signs of life.

There was a pitcher of cold water on the center-table, and after his face had received a liberal application, Frank James opened his eyes.

"Are you hurt much?" tenderly asked Jesse.

"No; I got a clip on the head from a billet of wood, in the hands of a female giant, that's all."

He arose to his feet and passed his hands painfully over his eyes.

"Give me a drink, Jesse, and I'll be all right," he said.

His brother produced a whisky flask, and Frank James took several swallows.

The effect was instantly shown in his brightened eyes and alert movements.

"You and Sam may look out for the rest of the shebang," said Jesse James, after he had viewed Frank's improved condition with deep satisfaction, "and I'll work this racket myself."

Suspicious noises outside, the rapid movement of many feet, and the low whispering of voices, induced Bass and Frank James to hurry from the study at once.

When they had gone, Jesse James looked about the room carefully.

A large iron box in a corner soon attracted his attention.

"That contains old Lafitte's treasure," was his instant thought.

After listening intently for a moment, and hearing no sounds from without, he stepped forward to the box, and, kneeling, began an examination of the lock.

Norah McFadden regarded him with malevolent eyes.

"Yez may take it and yez may not," she said, "but if ye'll take the advice av a woman that knows phwat's phwat, ye'll do the skip act out av this room moighty quick."

Jesse James looked up and thoughtfully scrutinized her countenance.

"You are as good as an ordinary man with that one sound arm of yours," he replied. "and I think that before I go any further I'll give you a little rope to occupy your mind."

Thus saying, he arose, drew out a long piece of stout cord from his pocket, and approaching her, seized her uninjured arm with no gentle grip.

The Irishwoman, realizing that resistance would be a piece of folly, allowed the bandit to tie her up.

But she did not remain silent during the operation.

On the contrary, her tongue wagged with a wrathful vehemence that made Jesse James shake with suppressed laughter.

"Oh, ye squint-eyed spalpane," she raved, "but wouldn't I loike to get yez in a room be meself wid me two arrums free to work the Kilkenny thrick upon yer murtherin' body. Be the powers, but I wud masticate your carcass into a cycloan av blows that ud hurry yer

voile bones to the devil's own coort. Put a rope about me as if I wur a shteer or a ragin' catamaran, wud yez? Wull, ye'll rue the day ye iver laid voylent hands on Norah McFadden, for ye'll foind her on yer thrack some day whin yez little drame av it. Oh, ye red-headed rack av bones, how I hate the soight av yer ugly mug. Ye remoid me av the scharecrow I had in me garden beyant Blarney Castle. They moight put yez in a mu-zaum as the woild man av Borneoho, bad luck to yez grinnin' mug!"

Jesse James saw that she was securely bound, and then he returned to the treasure box.

When he found that the lock could not easily be broken he drew a small funnel from his pocket.

The narrow end was inserted in the keyhole, and through it he blew into the box several handfuls of powder.

A fuse was next inserted and lighted.

As he took a position in the opposite corner, to wait for the explosion, Norah McFadden uttered shriek after shriek of mortal terror.

When the explosion came she was hurled violently to the floor, where she lay without sense or motion until long after Jesse James had robbed the now open box and quitted the room.

As he was about to ascend the stairs to the second story, to explore the rooms in that part of the mansion, a door suddenly opened at his back and a stern voice ordered him to throw up his hands.

Turning quickly with his revolver out, Jesse James saw that the speaker was Marcus Lafitte.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE ROBBERY LEADS TO ANOTHER.

The owner of the mansion was a mile away from it when Frank and Jesse James and Sam Bass began their lawless operations.

He had set out early in the evening for the ranch of his brother, in order to induce the latter to come to the reception.

Julius Lafitte was older than Marcus, and very eccentric.

He was a bachelor, and lived alone in a little cabin, although he was rich.

When his brother invited him to come to the reception he declined on the score of having no carriage.

"I will come for you," said Marcus.

"I'd rather walk."

"Walk, then. The distance is short."

"Well, I'll think about it," returned Julius, in a grumbling tone, "but I tell you flat-footed, Marcus, that I don't care a rap for your fine women, and your political big guns, and monkey-faced foreigners."

"Come on my account, and consider it a personal visit," said his brother, kindly.

"I'll consider the matter."

Marcus Lafitte was forced for the time to content himself with this reply.

But when the night of the notable event came and Julius had not made his appearance, he determined to leave his guests for a little while and ride over to his brother's ranch and make one last appeal.

When he arrived he found Julius in earnest conversation with an attractive girl of seventeen or thereabouts.

They were sitting on a bench in front of the cabin when Marcus Lafitte rode up.

"Can't go, brother," said the bachelor, before Marcus could say a word. "I have company, and the laws of hospitality can't be broken, you know."

Marcus Lafitte bent a curious look upon the girl.

She met the look frankly and with a smile.

"Yer brother hyar is an old friend of mine," she said. "I am Molly Culdán."

"Oh!"

The rich planter's ejaculation was expressive of the keenest pleasure.

"I am delighted to meet the daughter of the woman who saved my brother from drowning."

The incident had occurred two years before, while Julius Lafitte was driving a band of cattle through the hills to Carthage.

It was in the springtime, and the streams were swollen and dangerous.

In attempting to ford a small river, near the Culdán place, Julius Lafitte had been swept from the saddle of his horse, and would have drowned but for the opportune appearance and courageous action of Molly's mother.

Strong physically, and an expert swimmer, she had reached the cattleman just as he was about to sink for the last time, and had brought him safely to shore.

He remained at Mrs. Culdán's house for several days, and during that time he conceived a great liking for the fifteen-year-old Molly.

When he took his departure he obtained Mrs. Culdán's promise that Molly should be allowed to visit him the next year.

The visit was made, and repeated, and the feeling of affection which each entertained for the other became strengthened by time.

Molly's present visit had been made for the purpose of enlisting the old bachelor's co-operation in her search for Karl Hastings.

She did not believe that Jessie James had killed the young detective, and though she had reached the robbers' retreat some hours after they had gone, to find no trace of the missing man, yet her belief that Hastings was alive was not destroyed.

Marcus Lafitte remained at his brother's cabin for a short time, and then set about for his return home.

As he stepped upon the veranda his nerves received a severe shock.

Luke Hastings lay dead beside the chair in which he had been sitting when the planter left the mansion an hour before; while Paul de Grassim was huddled in a corner, groaning like one in the direst agony.

After addressing a few sharp words to the disgruntled Frenchman, Lafitte learned what had happened.

On one side of the hall, under the stairs, was a closet.

The planter entered it when he heard the heavy tramp of a man's feet in one of the rooms beyond.

As Jesse James passed the closet to ascend to the second story, Marcus Lafitte stepped out of his place of concealment.

He was armed with a revolver, and the muzzle was on a line with the bold outlaw's forehead, when the latter

turned on hearing the stern command to throw up his hands.

For one brief instant the two men stood facing each other, motionless.

Then Jesse James burst into a harsh laugh.

"You wouldn't kill your own wife, I reckon," was his cold remark.

"My wife! Where is she?"

Lafitte turned pale as death.

Jesse James smiled inwardly at the effect of his words.

"She is in your study, and one of my men has a pistol pointed at her head. If anything happens to me, if I should not return to the study, in fact, within five minutes, my man has orders to shoot her dead. I have taken my precautions, you see."

The planter uttered a groan, and let his pistol hand fall to his side.

Then out came Jesse James' revolver, and the positions of the foes were instantly reversed.

"It's your dukes which must point upward," the banister said, with affected suavity. "Come, no nonsense, for our wife's life depends upon the speed with which I conclude my business in this elegant shebang."

Marcus Lafitte held up his hands.

Jesse James possessed himself of his victim's revolver, and then rapidly went through his pockets.

While this affair was progressing in the hall, Frank James and Sam Bass were in the large billiard-room in the rear, where they had succeeded in herding all the guests of the house, as well as Mrs. Lafitte, a little woman of ill health, who went into hysterics when her maid entered the room and announced that the dreaded James boys were shooting people and robbing the house.

General Newson stood by the billiard-table, nervously gazing one of the ivory balls, when happening to look over his shoulder, he saw that the attention of both Frank James and Sam Bass was being directed at that moment toward a petite blonde, of great loveliness, who was smiling at the bandits as if she rather enjoyed the situation.

The general resolved to take advantage of the opportunity presented, and do some effective work.

"I'll show 'em I'm no poltroon, even if I did submit to the demands of that fiend, Jesse James, when he got the whip on me outside."

Seizing two of the billiard balls, he flung them with all his force, one at Frank James' head and the other at the head of Sam Bass.

The first missed its mark and went crashing through the heavy plate window back of the pretty blonde, who immediately fell to the floor and emitted a series of piercing screams.

The other ball struck Sam Bass on the side of the head, above the ear, and he went down like a log.

A third ball was in the general's hand, and he was about to let it fly in the direction of Frank James, when the law's bowie knife went whizzing through the air to strike the ex-Confederate officer in the shoulder and make him drop his ivory weapon of defense as if it had been a hot poker.

In the confusion which followed these exciting demonstrations Jessie James entered the room.

He saw Sam Bass lying apparently dead upon the floor, and his brother Frank raining blows from his clubbed

revolver upon the head of the luckless general, while his quick eye also caught the expression of several of the guests' faces, which denoted that they were about ready to cast off the rôle of submission and assume the aggressive.

Crack! crack! spoke his revolver, and the bullets entering the wall just over the group of guests, caused the most belligerent among them to call out beseechingly for him to desist.

With a grim smile, the leader of the outlaws turned to Frank James, who now stood gazing at the bleeding and insensible form of his victim on the floor.

"Come Frank," he said, "let's get a move on. Our work is done."

"How about Sam?"

"Isn't he dead?"

"I don't think so."

Jesse James went over to the prostrate Bass and was gazing with sorrowful eyes at a large lump on the side of his head, when the sound of horses' feet outside made him jump to his feet with a start.

The next moment these words, in the clear, ringing voice of Curly Jones, were heard:

"Surround the house, boys, and shoot down the devils if they attempt to escape."

Jesse James looked at Frank, but said not a word.

Then he dashed to the side window, and giving the glass a kick with his heavy shoe, sprang through the opening which was thus made, and reached the shelter of a group of cork elms before Curly Jones' men had got around to that side of the mansion.

Frank James followed his brother, and they were running through the garden in the direction of the entrance to the grounds, where they had left their horses, when loud shouts proclaimed the discovery of their escape.

"Howl, you curs," hissed Jesse James, as he sped onward, "but you'll never walk my log."

They were within a few yards of the open gate when a bullet passed, in uncomfortable proximity to Jesse James' head.

It had been fired from without the grounds.

Instantly the outlaws prostrated themselves behind a tree.

"What fools we were," whispered Jesse to Frank, "not to have figured on this programme. Curly Jones has left a man or two at the gate to watch our horses and give us a rally if we come up."

"What's to be done?"

"I'll show you."

Jumping to his feet, he called out in a disgusted voice: "Who are you shooting at, you lubbers? Do you take us for the James boys?"

An apologetic voice instantly answered:

"I did, for a fact. Who are you?"

"Captain Sanderson, of St. Louis, and Simon Hervy, from Jefferson City."

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

Frank and Jesse James now went forward boldly.

There was no moon, which was a lucky circumstance for them, as they were able to reach a point within ten feet of the sentinel before the latter discovered that he had been imposed upon.

He was one of the two mountaineers who had fought

with Frank James three days before, and he recognized the bandit when the latter came through the gateway.

But he was covered with two revolvers before he could get his Winchester to his shoulder.

After disarming him, the bandits mounted their horses and rode away.

As they galloped down the road, shouts and yells at the gate told them that Curly Jones' men were on their track.

Away they went, like the wind, and in a short time the pursuers were distanced, and the James boys began to breathe freely.

They had left their rifles at the camp by the stream where they cooked their supper, and, recovering them, they rode toward the house of a friend, some fifteen miles north of the Lafitte mansion, and half a mile from the little railway station of Moquette.

The friend was a former Clay County farmer, who now resided on a little tract of land and raised vegetables for a living.

He had but one leg, and rheumatism had so crippled up one of his hands as to make him fit only for the easiest kinds of manual labor.

Seth Moyne was his name, and he was a little, dried-up specimen of humanity, with a bald head, a hairless face, and two black eyes set deep in his head.

He was an inordinate tobacco chewer, and he had just arisen from his bed to take his midnight chew when the James boys knocked at his door.

"Well, well," was his surprised ejaculation, when he saw who his visitors were, "but of all the men, you are ther ones I least expected to see. An' me a-thinkin' of you, too, all ther evenin'."

Frank and Jessie walked into the main apartment and sat down on a rude lounge.

Seth Moyne eyed them with quiet satisfaction.

"I'm powerful poor, boys," he said, after he had listened to the relation of his guests' late exciting experiences, "but I don't want no man's charity. When I get money, I wantner yearn it."

"Come to the point, Seth," said Jessie James, with an amused grin. "You have a scheme in your mind. Let it out quick, for we can't stay with you but a few minutes longer."

The one-legged man laughed.

"You allers was a keen hand ter see through folks, Jess," he said, with an admiring glance at the bandit, "an' so I reckon it 'ud be a plumb insensible thing ter beat around ther bush with you. Here goes, then. I seen Colonel Wharton to-day."

"What of it?"

"He is expectin' somethin' by ther Kansas City, Fort Scott & Memphis express, which will sail inter Moquette at six o'clock this mornin'."

It was now after midnight.

"What does he expect?" asked Frank James.

"Fifty thousand dollars in silver certificates, ther price of er plantation his agent in Memphis sold t'other day." Frank and Jesse exchanged significant glances.

Seth Moyne rubbed his crippled hand softly, and grinned.

"Gimme ten thousand if you make ther haul," he said, "an' I'll be satisfied."

"All right," said Jesse James, promptly.

Moquette was a flag station, situated in a picturesque glen, and, at the time of which we write, it possessed by three buildings—a little railway ticket office, with freight room attached, a general merchandise store, and a blacksmith shop.

At half-past four o'clock on the morning of the James boys' visit to Seth Moyne's cabin the total male population of Moquette, consisting of five persons, was sitting on a bench outside of the barroom, located at the rear of the general store.

"It's goin' ter be er fine day, judge," said the merchant to the blacksmith, both of whom were feeling the warming effects of the brace of cocktails which they had swallowed a few moments before.

"I reckon, major, an' ef we don't run a right pea chance of getting a boom price for ther corn crap, ther signs don't figger worth a cent in these yere time. Hello, a couple of passengers for ther express, I reckon."

The blacksmith's last remark was occasioned by the arrival of two horsemen.

They were Frank and Jesse James, but so artfully disguised that their most intimate friends might not have known them.

Quickly dismounting, they tied their horses to the railing in front of the store, and then approached the five men on the saloon bench.

Halting before them, the James boys drew their pistols and pointed them so that each of the five men thought that his particular head was menaced.

"Attention!" sternly commanded Jesse James.

Each man of the quintette raised his eyes and gazed tremblingly at the pair of desperadoes.

"Arise!"

The five men arose.

"Step down to the ground and form in single file."

The order was obediently carried out.

"Now, forward, march, to the depot!"

The little company filed off, Frank James walking on one side and Jesse James at the rear.

One of the company was the operator and agent, and into his room the five men were marched.

Then the door was closed, and each man was relieved of his weapons and spare cash.

Colonel Wharton rode up just as the operation was being finished.

Having secured his horse, he walked toward the ticket office, for the purpose of sending a dispatch to Springfield.

"One moment, colonel," said the outlaw, politely. "The agent is very ill, taken suddenly with smallpox."

The colonel made a hasty retreat up the station platform.

"Keep away from me," he cried, in terror, as Jesse James walked toward him. "You have been in the room with him, and I'll catch the disease from you."

The window of the office was open, and the conversation between the bandit and the rich land owner had been heard by the five prisoners.

"It's a lie! I'm all right," shouted the agent.

Colonel Wharton's expression changed quickly from fear to rage.

Striding up to Jesse James, he raised the riding-

which he held in his hand, and would have brought it down on the outlaw's head if the latter had not acted promptly and decisively.

Springing to one side, he let out his right and caught the colonel under the jaw.

A second blow stretched the land owner upon the platform.

Frank James appeared at this juncture, and Colonel Wharton was soon bound and carried to the railway office.

Locking the door upon the prisoners, the James boys wholly waited for the arrival of the express.

Five minutes passed and the shrill whistle of the engine was heard.

"We've got to do the work of half-a-dozen men," whispered Jesse to Frank.

"That's all right."

"How's your nerve?"

"As stiff as a poker."

"Then success is certain."

CHAPTER X.

JESSE JAMES MEETS WITH A SURPRISE.

The moment the train came to a standstill in front of the little station, the robbers rushed to the cab of the locomotive, and, drawing pistols on the engineer and fireman, commanded them to step down.

The two railway employees instantly complied.

While Frank James covered them with pistols, Jesse James jumped into the cab and searched for the coal hammer.

Having found it, he leaped to the platform, and, pushing the engineer and fireman before him, halted only when he came opposite to the door of the express car.

It had been opened when the station was reached, but when the messenger saw the two bandits, and at the same time noted the absence of the agent, he closed the door again and locked it.

His next move was to take the money out of the safe, consisting of some five thousand dollars besides the Wharton package, and deposit it in a satchel which he carried with him.

Having quickly accomplished this task, he swung the door to, and was making for the end door of exit when it was suddenly burst open, and he was confronted by Jesse James.

"Drop that satchel, and give me the key of the safe!" the harsh command of the outlaw.

The messenger did not wholly comply.

He produced the key, but he retained his hold on the satchel.

Not suspecting at the moment that the satchel contained anything of value, Jesse James took the key and put it to the safe.

The moment the outlaw's back was turned the messenger hurried to the door, reached the platform, and descended to the ground on the side farthest from the platform.

He was moving away swiftly, and congratulating himself upon his good luck, when he was halted by Frank James, who was standing on the front platform of the passenger car, in which he had corraled all the train men and passengers.

"Throw down that satchel and skip!" he called, in a voice that was fraught with deadly meaning.

The messenger paid no heed to the command, but started from a walk to a run.

Bang!

A bullet caught him in the side, and brought him to a sudden halt.

Springing to the ground, Frank James reached his victim, and, dealing him a blow on the head from the butt of his revolver, stretched the faithful messenger senseless upon the ground.

As the outlaw took up the satchel his brother came running toward him with a pale face convulsed with rage.

But when he saw the prostrate messenger and the captured satchel, he was all smiles in an instant.

As soon as they had assured themselves that they had really secured the plunder for which they had stopped the train, the James boys hurried to the spot where they had left their horses.

They were in the act of mounting them when a sudden thought made Jesse James say, hurriedly:

"Hold my nag, Frank, while I run over to the railway office a minute."

He was off before his brother could say a word in remonstrance.

Before leaving the passenger car, Frank James had locked it, and all the train hands were still inside.

As Jesse James opened the door of the railway office the conductor called out from the car window:

"When are you going to let the train proceed?"

"In a minute or two. Don't get impatient, sonny."

The door then closed upon his form.

Advancing to the agent and operator, whom Frank James had tied to his chair in front of the telegraphic instrument, the dare-devil outlaw quickly released him, and then pointing a pistol at his head, said, sternly:

"I want to send a message to Avilla."

"All right," said the operator, meekly. "There's a blank. Write it down."

Jesse James took a blank and wrote these words:

TO CURLY JONES OR THE SHERIFF OF JASPER COUNTY:—We spit in your face and dare you to take it up. As we are the boys who are hard to manage, so also are we the boys who will make it hot for those who try to take us. FRANK AND JESSIE JAMES.

The operator clicked his instrument and sent the taunting message over the wires, without a word of comment.

As soon as he had finished, Jesse James proceeded to bind him again.

Then the instrument was wrenched from its place and smashed beyond repair.

"There," said the flushed and triumphant outlaw, "I reckon I've prevented the sending of any more dispatches for a while."

Walking out of the door, he relocked it, and then mounting to the platform of the passenger car, kicked open the door.

"Come out, Mister Engineer and Mister Fireman," he cried, "and set your old firebox a-humming."

"All right, sir," was the humble response of the engineer.

As the train started up the James boys sprang on their horses and dashed away.

Their road took them into a thickly wooded section near the base of the hills.

Suddenly three mounted men appeared in front of them.

It was light enough for them to distinguish the face of the foremost.

Jesse James reeled in his saddle.

"It's Karl Hastings' ghost," he cried, in amazement, as he put his hand over his eyes.

"Not so," was the stern answer, "but Karl Hastings in the flesh."

CHAPTER XI.

DICK LITTLE IN A NEW ROLE.

The companions of Karl Hastings were Burt Henston, the husband of Sally, and Julius Lafitte, the bachelor brother of the rich planter, and they had assisted in rescuing the detective from a horrible death.

When the James boys carried him away from in front of the house of Mrs. Culdán, he was suffering from a wound in the scalp.

After binding him securely to a tree, in the depths of the woods, the two bandits returned to the house, as the reader is aware, to await the possible coming of Molly Culdán.

Her failure to appear half an hour after the funeral induced Jesse James to believe that she had suffered cruel wrong at the hands of Karl Hastings.

With the fierce resolve to put the detective to instant death, he hurried back with Frank to the tree where he had left his prisoner.

Karl Hastings was in full possession of his senses when the James boys reappeared.

He was strapped to the back of Jesse's horse, and the two bandits, mounted on Frank's animal, rode as rapidly as possible to an underground hut in the middle of an immense swamp.

The hut had been constructed by a former member of the James gang, one Curry Smith, after his escape from the State prison, whither he had been sent for the term of his natural life.

One day he ventured out to find his old leader, and was shot and killed by a sheriff's posse while on his way back to his underground retreat.

Jesse James had visited the place several times, and considered it the safest of all his many hiding-places.

It was not easy to reach, and had no well-defined trail leading to it.

As the Swamp Fox eluded the British forces during the war of the Revolution, by concealing himself and his men in the labyrinthian mazes of the Carolina swamps; as Osceola, the Seminole, defied capture while secreted in the almost impenetrable Everglades of Florida, so the James boys laughed at the detectives in the security of their subterranean haven in this wild Missouri morass.

The entrance was at the end of a small lagoon, and directly under a giant sycamore.

Tall ferns concealed the trapdoor of logs, which being lifted, disclosed a narrow stairway leading to the underground room.

The walls were logs, plastered with mud, while the floor was slate rock, the pieces having been brought to

the place by Curry Smith after many laborious trips to the mountains.

When Karl Hastings had been deposited on a pile of deerskins in a corner of the room, Jesse James lighted a candle taken from a box in a rude cupboard, and then sitting down beside his prisoner, looked him steadily in the face.

"I am going to kill you," he said, in slow, even tones though his blue eyes had a murderous glitter in them "unless you can satisfy me that Molly Culdán is alive, well, and has suffered no harm at your hands."

"I will tell you the truth; that's all I can do," was the calm answer.

"The truth is precisely what I want. Where is she?"

"I do not know."

"You have made that remark before, and you have been given the lie. Hadn't you better change your tune?"

Hastings turned his head away scornfully.

"Do your worst," he said, with a long breath, "for no matter what I may say, you will refuse to believe me."

"You know where she is and you dare not tell me," he most shouted Jesse James, in an access of wrath. "I give you five minutes to clear your skirts. If you can't then your doom is sealed."

He took out his watch and noted the minutes as they passed by.

Karl Hastings neither looked at him nor opened his mouth.

The five minutes up, Jesse James arose to his feet and whispered a few words in his brother's ear.

"No, no," the latter hurriedly whispered, in reply "that would be too horrible."

Jesse James had suggested the burying alive of the detective.

"There's an empty panther trap back of the sycamore and we can dump him in that and cover him up without any trouble."

"I object, decidedly."

"He has ruined Molly."

"We have no evidence of it."

"Why don't he come out with the truth, then?"

"He may not know where she is. Wait twenty-four hours before wreaking your vengeance on this detective. Wait long enough, anyway, for one to ride back to the house and see if Molly isn't there."

"Pooh, Frank, you're losing your grip. Why should we grant any favors to this close-mouthed blood-mone hunter? He ought to die, Molly or no Molly."

"If you put him out of the way now, it will be again my wish."

Jesse James, muttering angrily to himself, strode toward the cupboard, found a demijohn of whisky, and took several drinks.

The fiery liquor appeared to brighten his mental faculties, though it did not cool his desire for revenge on the man at his feet.

"I've got to do it. He owes me his life on half a dozen propositions. When we leave here, which must be before morning, I'll fix it so that Mr. Karl Hastings will pass his checks in a few hours."

"What do you propose doing?"

"Wait and you'll see, Frank," said Jesse James, determinedly.

How the hours before the departure of the two outlaws passed, it is not necessary to say.

It was close upon daybreak when they prepared to leave the underground hut.

Among the many articles in the cupboard was a keg of powder.

Jesse James, when the time to leave arrived, tied Karl Hastings so that he could not move, and then placed the keg of powder within a foot of his head.

This done, he opened the bunghole, poured out a handful of powder, and sprinkled it over the top of the keg.

The last act in the fiendish programme was to place the lighted candle within a few inches of the bunghole.

It was a dangerous proceeding, for candles splutter, and there might have been an explosion which would have sent the James boys, as well as the detective, into another world.

But Jesse James performed his work with the utmost coolness, and even smiled when he saw Frank hastily climb the stairs.

"The candle will last six hours, at the furthest, and then good-by to Karl Hastings."

Frank James made no reply.

But what he thought was this:

"The detective is as good as dead, anyhow, or if by any chance the candle should go out, he will starve to death, for he can't move, and it's not likely that he will ever be discovered."

But the candle did not go out, of its own accord, nor did Jesse James' victim starve to death.

A large Norway rat was the detective's first friend in need.

About an hour after the departure of his enemies, the rat appeared, and after running around the room, mounting the table and skurrying over the skins upon which Hastings was lying, leaped to the top of the powder keg and ran its sharp nose into the bunghole.

The detective watched the rat with a curiosity that was mingled with hope.

Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the rat gave its tail a flick and over went the candle to the floor, leaving the room in darkness.

Karl Hastings at that moment felt the utmost affection for the long-tailed rodent.

Daylight came, and ere long the detective began to experience the pangs of hunger.

When night came his lips were parched and he was in high fever.

"Oh, for one drink of water," he moaned, "just one rink of clear, cold water."

Another morning came and found him weak, but rational, and with no trace of fever.

A rainstorm in the night had worked the change.

The roof was old and leaky, and the rain came down upon his face and his body and deluged the floor.

A pool was formed in a hollow close by his head, and he managed to twist his neck so that he could drink out of it.

How long he slept after this welcome dispensation of nature he never knew, but when he awoke it was night.

Weak with hunger, and suffering from his wound, he uttered one faint, despairing cry.

The cry was heard and answered by the joyful notes of a woman's voice, and a moment later the trapdoor was swinging back and Molly Culdán ran down the stairs.

She was followed by Burt Henston and Julius Lafitte.

After scouring the mountains in vain, she had gone to Lafitte's for assistance.

While at his cabin waiting for the old bachelor to make ready for the journey he had agreed to take with her, he made a remark which put her on the right track.

"Have you ever heard of the swamps hereabout being used as hiding-places?" he asked.

"No—yes, yes!" clasping her hands as a sudden thought occurred to her. "I've heard of one place. Jesse James spoke of it ther last time he come ter see mother, and he said that if he ever got driven from pillar ter post he'd light out fer Curry Smith's underground hole, an' all ther detectives in ther world couldn't find him."

"Do you know where it is?"

"You bet. He guv me directions how ter get to ther place, sayin' that if he ever did bunk thar he wanted his friends ter know whar he was so they could pervide him with grub onct in a while."

Intent solely upon rescuing Karl Hastings from a terrible fate, the girl had no thought that in speaking of the swamp hiding-place she was betraying one of Jesse James' most important secrets.

Julius Lafitte chuckled softly when she ceased speaking.

He had no love for the outlaw, and he made up his mind that the officers should soon know all about the underground hut.

On the way to the place, after a day's journey, they met Burt Henston, with whom Lafitte was well acquainted.

He had given up the search for his missing pigs, and was on his way home when Lafitte hailed him.

"I'll go with you," he said, when he learned what had brought Molly and the old bachelor to that section of the country.

His offer was gratefully accepted, and as he was on horseback, the trip to the underground hut was continued without delay.

They reached it in an hour, and, having put Hastings on one of the horses after he had been given needed refreshment, and his wound looked after, the party started for the home of Henston.

"It won't do to go far with this young man," said the pig raiser with decision, "for he needs a bed and medical attendance at this very moment."

"Yes, yes," returned Molly Culdán, earnestly, "and let's lose no time a-gittin' to your house, Mr. Henston."

Hastings summoned all his strength for the journey, and bore up so well that he was able to keep his saddle all the way without support.

Molly Culdán left the party when within half a mile of the house.

"I am going for a doctor," she said. "I know of one who lives about a mile from here."

Julius Lafitte offered to go with her, but she refused his company.

"Attend to Mr. Hastings during my absence, and you will please me better."

The old bachelor said no more, for he knew it would be useless to attempt to change her mind.

When Karl Hastings showed himself before Jesse James in the flesh and had spoken the words with which the last chapter ended, he was seized with a sudden faintness, and would have fallen to the ground had not Burt Henston leaped from his horse's back and caught him in his arms.

Frank James pointed his revolver at Julius Lafitte's head as he saw the old bachelor's hand go backward.

"Shoot," said Lafitte indignantly, "if it is your policy to murder men who have never harmed you."

Jesse James, who had now recovered his wits, brought his own revolver to bear on Henston, who was kneeling beside the insensible detective.

"Get up," he harshly commanded, "and let me finish the scoundrel who lured away Molly Culdán."

"The man who says he ever injured that girl is a liar," shouted Julius Lafitte. "She is alive and unharmed, and she'll be here inside of an hour."

"You're not lying to me, old man," he said, fiercely, "for if you are——"

"He speaks the truth," put in Bert Henston, quickly, "and Karl Hastings owes his life to her courageous efforts. She led us to the underground hut where you left him to die."

"Jesse," said Frank James, slowly, "I reckon we'd better be going."

Sally Henston here put in a word.

She had listened to the conversation in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Yes, go," she said, with a shaking voice, "and keep on going until you come to the jumping-off place. I—I—wish——"

But what she wished was never learned, for Molly Culdán and the doctor rode up at this juncture and interrupted her speech.

"I found him before I'd gone half-way to his house," she excitedly exclaimed. "He had been visiting a patient and was on his way home."

She would have said more had she not caught sight of Jesse and Frank James.

A shudder ran through her frame as she gazed at the former, and turning her head away, she held out her hand to Julius Lafitte.

"You're ther only friend I have now," she said, in a low voice.

"How about Hastings?" he asked.

She blushed vividly, but said nothing in reply.

Jesse James opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

"I have lost her friendship," he said to himself, bitterly, and then lowering his pistol, made a sign to his brother.

"Good-by, ladies and gentlemen all," said Frank, politely, "and I hope we may never see any of you again."

"Same here," said Julius Lafitte, promptly.

The James boys rode off with sober faces.

"Frank," said Jesse, when they were out of hearing of the party in front of the house, "I want to do something desperate."

"I am feeling kind o' mean myself, Jess."

"Suppose we snap our fingers at the officers and ride into the nearest town and make things hum?"

"Enough said."

"We'll get there by daylight, and we'll tackle everything in sight."

"That's the idea."

And on they rode.

Kent's Corners was just waking up when they entered the main street.

Passing an alley they saw a masked man emerging from the rear of a store.

"A burglar," said Frank James.

"You bet."

"What do you say to giving him a scare?"

"You've called my hand, Frank."

The masked man, who was a burglar, in fact, and who had just been overhauling the contents of a large safe, saw the two horsemen and then took to his heels.

Jesse James sent a bullet after him, but he did not slacken his speed.

"I don't want to kill or wound the dern cuss," he said to Frank, "and yet he's got to stop or you may kick me for a hide-bound liar."

They put spurs to their horses and dashed after the fleeing criminal.

At the corner of a street he turned like a hunted animal and fired a shot from his revolver at Jesse James' head.

The bullet took the skin off the tip of the outlaw's nose.

"That's crowding the mourners," he shouted. "Here, take some of your own medicine."

Crack! went his pistol, and down fell the burglar with a bullet in his knee.

"You must have more respect for your betters, sir," said Jesse James, jocosely, as he leaped from his saddle and approached the wounded criminal. "The next time you have any business to transact with me, remember that my head office is in Clay County, and that my name isn't Mud."

The burglar had dropped his pistol and was groaning loudly.

Jesse James jerked off his mask, only to utter a cry of savage triumph.

"Blast my eyes if it isn't Dick Little!"

CHAPTER XII.

ESCAPE OF THE JAMES BOYS.

It was, indeed, Dick Little, the traitor.

After being two days in the custody of Curly Jones, he escaped from the little county jail where he was being temporarily confined by feigning to be desperately ill.

His flesh wounds in the leg gave him little trouble, for a surgeon's investigation had shown them to be but trivial, the one above the ankle having been aggravated at the time of his reception by a slight sprain, the swelling from which had disappeared the day after his capture.

But the rascal was an excellent actor, and as the jailer had not been present during the surgeon's examination and treatment, Little succeeded in making his guardian believe that he was in a bad way, and that unless he had plenty of fresh air he would die.

The jailer was a simple-minded farmer, who had held the office but a few months, and taking his prisoner's representations for solid facts, he removed Little to his own sleeping apartment, which fronted the street.

His vigilance was further relaxed when, after looking upon his prisoner, after an hour's absence, he found him apparently delirious.

"Doctor, doctor," the cunning rascal moaned, as he turned a pair of bloodshot eyes on the jailer, "give me something, quick, to ease this terrible pain."

The jailer was a humane man, and after speaking a few words with his wife, a large, bony woman, who was his sole assistant, he left the little jail to hunt up the physician and surgeon who had dressed Little's wounds.

When he had gone, the prisoner raved and acted so violently—thrashing the bedclothes, kicking at the bedpost and the wall, and tearing at his bandages, that the woman ran out to find some one who could assist her in holding him down.

Little was fully dressed—he had taken the precaution to get into his clothes while the jailer was out of the room that morning—and he was out of the window and down the street which led to the river before the jailer's wife got back.

His wounds made him limp, but he felt little inconvenience from them otherwise.

Several hours of rapid traveling induced a swelling of the leg, and he was glad to take a much needed rest in safe retreat in the woods.

The next day he procured food at a farmhouse, and he rewarded the old man who befriended him by stealing a horse from the premises.

Mounted bareback he rode to the outskirts of Kent's Corners.

He was without money, for he had been searched when taken to jail, and all his valuables removed to the office there.

"As I have spoiled my chance to get a reward by giving Jesse James away," he said to himself, with a sour face, "I have got to play a lone hand at the old game, or else go honest and hire out as a woodchopper or a pig stender. Not being used to manual labor, I think I'll experiment a little with the lone-hand business."

That night he broke into a blacksmith shop, secured several tools necessary for the commission of a burglar's enterprise, and made such effective use of them that when Frank and Jesse James overhauled him he had under amounting to over a thousand dollars on his person.

Jesse James gave one look at Little's pale face and then put the muzzle of his pistol to the traitor's head and fired.

Little stirred slightly as his remorseless enemy pressed

the trigger, and the bullet, instead of entering the skull and crashing through the brain as intended, struck a bone above the temple, glanced off and found final lodgement in a fence post close by.

But Jesse James thought he had killed Little when he saw the blood and noted the deathlike appearance of the traitor's face.

A number of citizens came running up when the shot was fired.

Frank James uttered a warning shout.

"Quit it, Jess; the coppers are coming."

Jesse James was about to ride out of town in the direction opposite to that by which he had entered, when he saw that he and Frank were between two fires.

The officers' force was a large one, and it had been divided so as to surround the bandits and cut off their retreat.

Jesse James' brow became black with rage when he saw that the leader was Curly Jones.

After a rapid consultation with his brother, Jesse James uttered a wild yell and dashed recklessly down the street toward his courageous enemies.

The firing began by the discharge of Curly Jones' rifle.

Down went Jesse James' horse, leaving the rider floundering in the dust.

He was on his feet and blazing away as Curly Jones and his men rushed up.

Frank James, close behind him, had his gun leveled on Curly Jones when a shot was fired from behind and Frank toppled over with a bullet in his lung.

About the same moment half a dozen determined men had thrown themselves upon Jesse James.

He struggled like a madman, and only yielded when blows sufficient to have felled an ox had been rained on his luckless head.

There was great rejoicing in Kent's Corners when the news spread that the James boys had been captured.

Curly Jones became the hero of the hour, while the members of the force were feasted royally wherever they went.

One man received the news with deep regret.

That man was Sam Bass.

He had been stunned by the blow from the billiard ball thrown by Gus Newson, and when he came to his senses he was a prisoner in the basement of the Lafitte mansion.

Before morning he escaped through the connivance of Norah McFadden.

She had visited him in his place of imprisonment in order to give further vent to her feelings of rage against Jesse James.

As Bass listened to her tirade, a cunning idea seized him.

"I hope they'll catch and hang the rascal," he said,

with savage earnestness, "for he's played me the meanest trick out."

"Phwat's that?"

"Why he left me laid out on the floor upstairs when he might have dashed a little water in my face, yanked me to my feet, and taken me with him. It was a scurvy trick," he went on with assumed bitterness, "to run off and leave me in the hands of those who are aching to see me swing."

"Yer right, Mистер Bass," rejoined Norah McFadden, emphatically, "an' it's sorry I am that he's not in your place this very blissed minit."

"I wish I could meet him face to face," said Bass, as he put on a ferocious look, "for I'd settle his hash so quick that it would make your head swim."

"An' wud yez now, sure?" queried the Irishwoman, eagerly.

"Indeed, I would. The dearest wish of my life is to meet him and choke the cowardly life out of him."

Norah McFadden cast her eyes to the floor and did some rapid thinking.

She hated Jesse James with a deadly hate, and she would have danced with joy could she have seen him dead at her feet at that moment.

As for Sam Bass, he was no more to her than an ordinary robber, who had failed in his criminal attempt.

Raising her eyes, she looked at him steadily for a moment.

He met her gaze unflinchingly.

"Oi've a great moind to thry the expiriment," she said, slowly.

"What experiment."

"The experiement of lettin' yez loose, me bonchal, an' puttin' yez on the hunt for that blaggard, Jesse James."

"Release me, and I promise you to kill him within a week," he said, fiercely.

"Troth a' Oi wull, thin," she replied.

And she not only gave him his freedom and saw him safely out of the grounds, but she supplied him with a sack of eatables and gave him back a portion of the money that had been taken from his person.

When he learned from the newspapers that Frank and Jesse James had been captured, he determined to come to their assistance and effect their release, if such a thing were possible.

Reaching Kent's Corners in disguise two days after the fight by the park, he was greeted with the welcome intelligence that, owing to Frank James' wound, the two bandits would not be removed to the county jail until the following week.

His plans were soon made.

The jail was a flimsy structure, but it was well guarded outside by Curly Jones' men.

Two days sufficed to make him well acquainted with these outside defenders.

By representing himself to be a detective from St. Louis, he not only succeeded in winning their confidence but he even imposed on Curly Jones, whose sharp eyes failed to penetrate the daring outlaw's disguise.

The night before the day selected for the removal of the prisoners to safer quarters, Sam Bass consummated his design.

With drugged liquor he put all the outside guards to sleep, and entering the jail for the ostensible purpose of making an important communication to the jailer, he watched his chance, overcame the custodian of the James boys, took the keys of the cells from his pocket, opened the heavy wooden doors, and brought the two bandits into the office.

Frank James was weak and ill from his wound, but his nerve kept him up until he had reached a place of safety.

"That was a tight squeeze," said his brother, "and but for Sam we might have been stretched."

"You bet," returned Frank.

The three outlaws rode away on horses belonging to the guards, and were in the hills before their escape was discovered.

On their way to their chosen retreat they passed the cabin of the friend who was sheltering Jim Cummings, and took the long-limbed bandit, now able to move about a little, along with them.

Curly Jones made a determined effort to recapture the James boys, and at last found their retreat.

But they had been gone several hours before his coming, and when he next heard of them they were in New Mexico.

Dick Little recovered from his injuries, and, strange to say, also recovered his standing as an enemy of the James boys and a friend of the officers.

He charged the burglary at Kent's Corners to Frank and Jesse James, and told such an artful story that the good people of the town, including the officers, really believed that he surprised Jesse James in the act of running off with the plunder, and that he snatched it from him and was shot down for his interference.

The fact that Molly Cudlan made no complaint against Little caused Curly Jones to reconsider his determination to have the rascal punished for his misdeeds.

The part he afterward played in the pursuit of the James boys is a matter of history.

Karl Hastings kept his bed in Sally Henston's house for several days.

Before he left it, pretty Molly Cudlan had consented to become his wife, but not before he promised to give up the chase after the James boys.

THE END.

Next week's issue (No. 4) will contain "Jesse James Black Agents; or, The Wild Raid on Bullion City."